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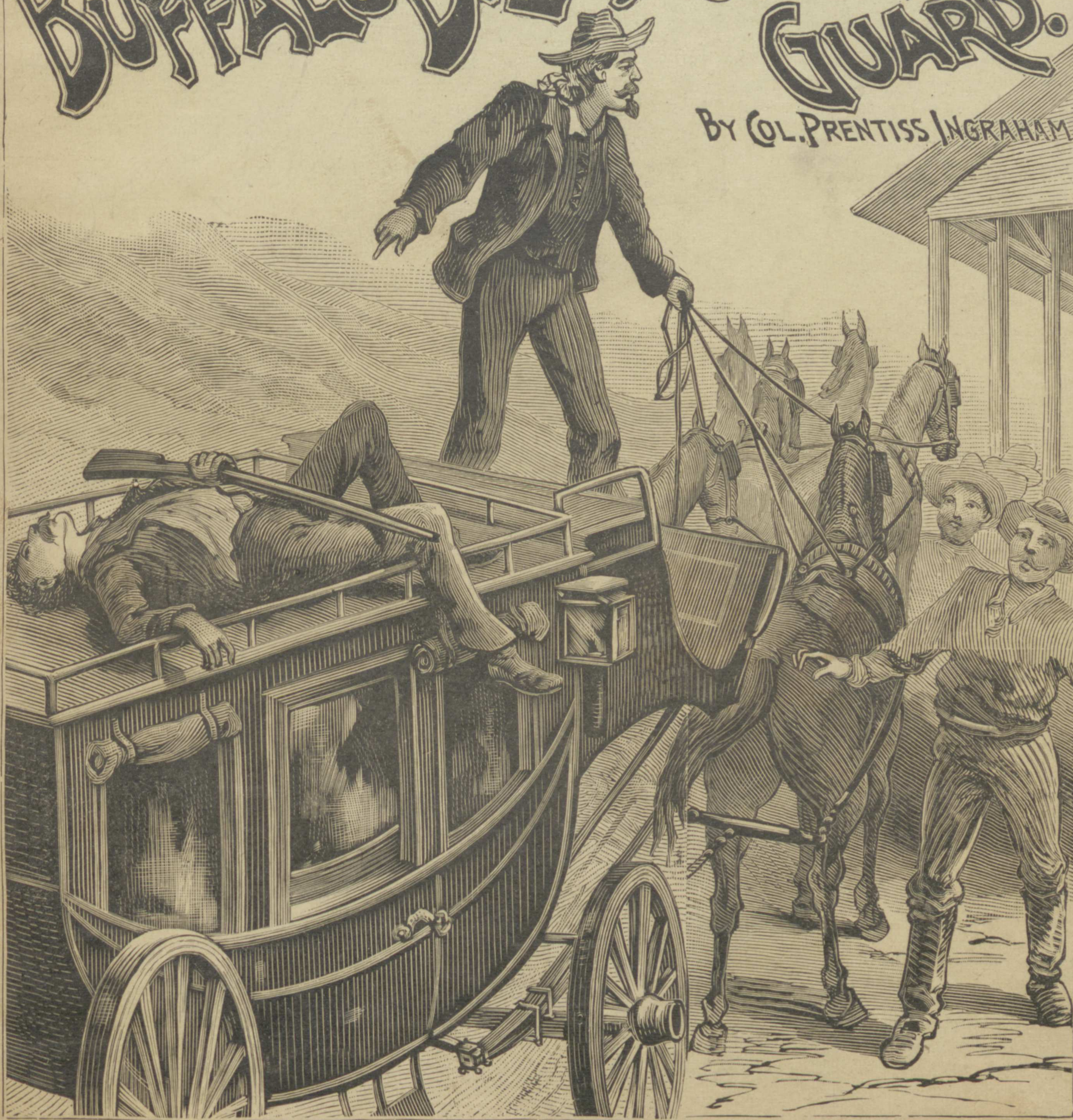
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Vol. LXXVII.

BUFFALO BILL'S GRIM GUARD.

By COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM



"I AM BACK, CAPTAIN, AND THERE LIES A MAN YOU MAY KNOW, WHILE THERE ARE MORE INSIDE IN LIKE CONDITION."

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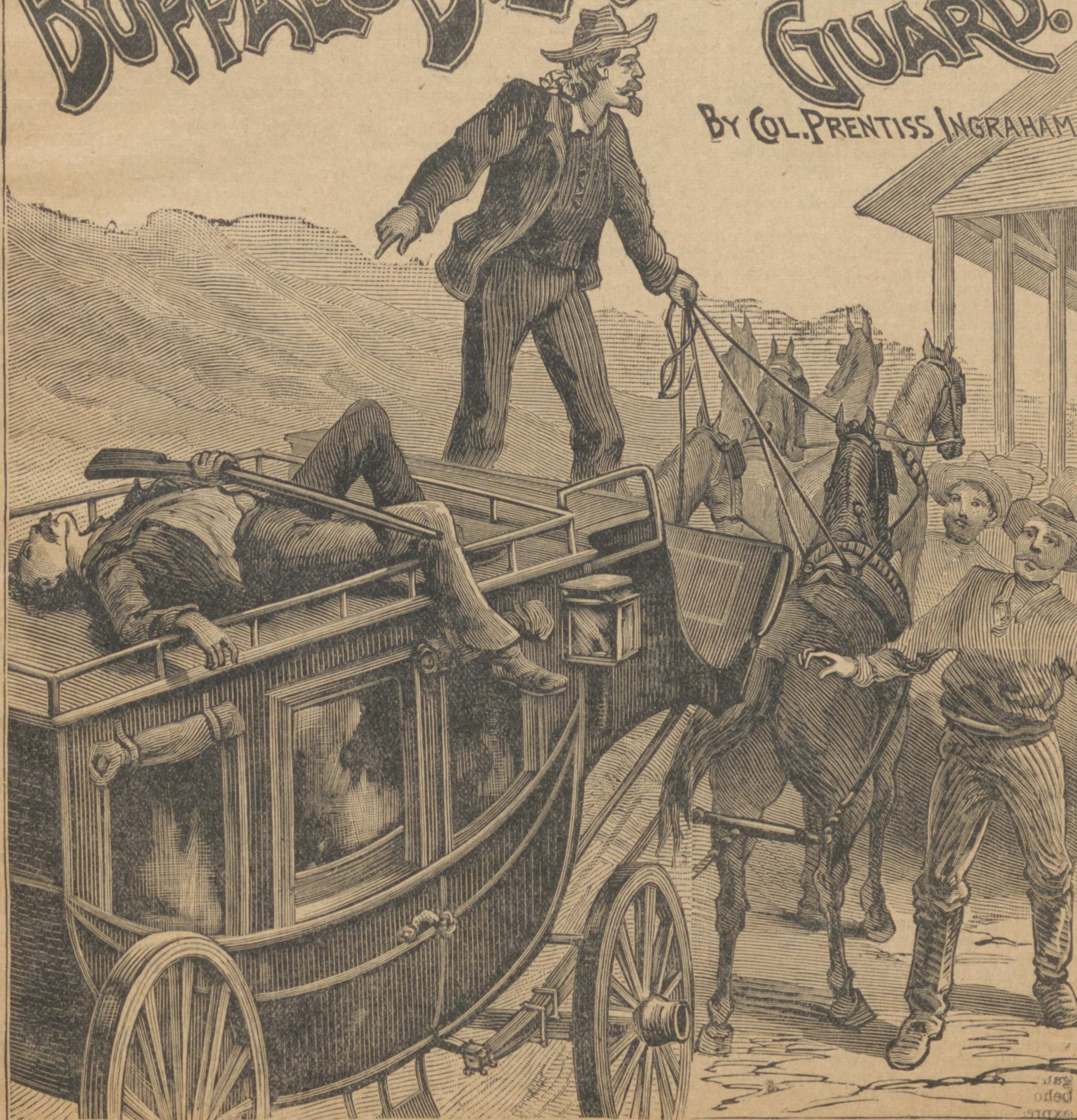
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"I AM BACK, CAPTAIN, AND THERE LIES A MAN YOU MAY KNOW, WHILE THERE ARE MORE INSIDE IN LIKE CONDITION."

Buffalo Bill's Grim Guard

OR,

The Chinaman in Buckskin.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM.

CHAPTER I.

TAKING UP THE GAUNTLET.

"No man dare do it!"

The words fell from the lips of the one who uttered them like a defiance.

It seemed as though the speaker wished to have some one say that he dared do what he had asserted no man dare do.

But, no one spoke in that crowd of fifty men who heard the defiant charge.

They were good men and true, most of them, a gathering of humanity only to be found in our own land, and here alone upon the frontier or in the Wild West.

There were men, there, with records of courage no one would dispute, men who had "killed their man" in scenes of desperate danger.

It was a gathering of heroes in buckskin, in a camp on the Overland Trail away back in the fifties.

The Overland Trail had stretched its devious, rugged, perilous way across the continent from the Missouri River to the Pacific, and the scene where this story opens was a camp, or station where were assembled the men who rode Pony Express, drove stage, and cared for the stock of the company which had made the venture of running a line through unprotected territory—men who, literally, carried their lives in their hands, and risked death in many a shape in the discharge of duty.

Yet they sat silent, now, while their chief flung into their teeth the cutting words:

"No man dare do it, I say!"

Still no answer came to the words a second time repeated.

All looked at each other, and eyes wandered hither and thither until they rested upon the face of some one known to be more reckless than others.

But, that one did not pick up the gauntlet thus thrown down.

There stood the chief in the long cabin—he who was the master spirit of that part of the Overland Trail; and there sat the men under his command.

But, no one moved; no one responded.

For the third time he spoke, and, as he did so, there was heard, without, the rapid clatter of hoofs and a sudden halt.

"I say for the third time that no man dare do what I demand."

"I dare!"

The words came from the lips of the speaker with a ring of defiant grit, and every eye turned upon him as he stood there, his form in the doorway.

In an instant he was recognized—a tall, broad-shouldered, splendidly-formed, handsome young man, with dark face and hair worn long, and a great shout went up, one of welcome mingled with admiration at his plucky avowal:

"I dare!"

"Buffalo Bill, welcome back! But, what is it you will dare?" cried the chief.

"Anything," was the cool response.

"I heard you say no man dare, in a tone as though you wished some man would, so I repeat: I dare!"

Again there was a cheer, and then the chief asked:

"And do you dare volunteer without knowing what it is I say no man dare do, Buffalo Bill?"

"Yes, chief."

"Certain death may await you?"

"I risk it on my every Pony Ride."

"You will have to go alone, doubtless."

"I play a lone hand with death every day of my life, chief, and so far I'm ahead in the game."

Another cheer announced the truth-telling words.

Though they had not dared take up the gauntlet themselves, the men were proud to behold one in their midst who would, and so expressed their admiration loudly.

"Buffalo Bill, we all know what you are, what you have done to win a name on the

Overland, and when I called for a volunteer or the work I had in view I knew if you were here you would at once be the one to offer.

"But, you have returned to camp, after a two weeks' ride as courier to the forts, and just as I had thrown down the gauntlet that no man dare go on the duty I wish to send him upon, you assert that you will do so."

"And I repeat it, chief."

"I will give you a loophole of escape, for the others know what I want of them; you do not, and you are at liberty to refuse to go when you do know the desperate peril that you have to encounter."

"It is enough for me to know that you need a man for certain work, and I volunteer for it, whatever it may be," came the firm response of the handsome borderman.

He had taken up the death gauntlet, and would stand by it!

CHAPTER II.

THE LETTER IN CIPHER.

ALL eyes were upon Buffalo Bill as he walked leisurely toward the man who was chief of the Overland division, and awaited with an unruffled brow to know into what danger he had thrust his life by taking up the gauntlet thrown down, that

"No man dare!"

"Buffalo Bill, I will say to you what I have said to all here—that I have news from my brother, who, years ago, went with a party of gold-hunters into the country of the Big Horn Basin—a land then almost wholly unknown, even to our best guides and scouts.

"Word came to me in a letter which I have here, and which I found tacked upon the door of my cabin in a most mysterious way.

"Who placed it there I do not know, but that it is genuine I will prove to you by saying that it was written in a cipher known only to my brother and myself, and which we made between us when schoolboys.

"The letter tells me that the gold-hunters have been successful to a certain extent, but that the redskins and accidents have cut their numbers down to only three, yet who all are too weak to ride horseback, and traveling in a springless wagon would quickly end their existence; so, knowing that I am chief of this division of the Overland, he asks me to send a coach with four good horses to relieve them.

"He begs me to send provisions, clothing, blankets and weapons, and stout bags in which to put their gold find.

"But he particularly says that he wishes but one man to come. He asserts that if other than one does come they will not reveal themselves, for they will not trust their secret to more than one, nor will they put themselves in the power of two men who might prove false, kill them and thus secure their gold, the temptation being so great.

"He sends me a map of the trail into the Big Horn Basin, but it stops short at a point where they are to meet the coach.

"If they see more than one man they will not appear, but to one messenger only will they reveal themselves, and for the great risk which that one runs they will pay him one thousand dollars the moment they reach the Overland Trail.

"If they are dead, having been killed by Indians, or died of sickness in the meantime, then the man will have to take his chances and return alone, as he came, receiving no reward.

"Now I have told you, Buffalo Bill, as I did the others here, just what I wished—a volunteer for the perilous service and rescue, and you have said that you dare go."

"I will go, sir, I repeat!"

"You must know, as I have remarked, that you invade a country where but one white man, California Joe, is said to have dared to venture, but what he knows of the Big Horn Basin is a secret which he yet keeps to himself.

"Although my brother went there with a party of thirty, his letter states that only three remain, so you may know that there is a strange fatality about the country.

"You must also know that half a dozen military commands have met with defeat, disaster and death in their attempts to get into the Big Horn Basin, and the Indians call it the Land of the Evil Spirit.

"To go there you must branch right off from the Overland, and after that there is no trail for you to follow.

"You will have the map my brother drew, to guide you, but there are mountains to go over, streams to cross and rugged lands to go through and so you will have to pick your way—make your own trail.

"I will do it, sir!"

"I do not limit you as to time; your coach shall be the best one here; it shall go loaded with provisions, arms and all things you need, while, in case of accidents, you are to carry two extra wheels, six horses and material and utensils for repairs to the stage and harness, doing your own horse-shoeing, and, in fact, being your own guide, road-maker, mechanic, and fighter."

"I'll go in fine style, sir, and if I don't get back somebody will get a good outfit."

"I think the somebody will be the Indians, for there can be no one else in the country, save my brother and his two companions.

"When you find them, the medicines I send, and the food, will build them up in a few days, so you can start back, and travel by easy stages each day."

"How long do you think it will take me, sir?"

"I place no limit as to the time, but should say that you cannot possibly average over twenty miles a day, and if you are back within three months I will consider that you have done well."

"If he gets back at all he'll do what I wagers big money no other man c'd do," cried a voice in the crowd, and the assertion was answered by a perfect chorus, crying:

"Right you are!"

Then others, emboldened by the man who had spoken, began to have their say.

"It's good-by forever, Buffalo Bill! We'll never see you again."

"Ye'r' as good as dead, Pard Bill!"

"Leave us a lock o' yer scalp, Cody, so ther Injuns won't git it all!"

"Yer grave is at t'other end o' ther trail, Pard Willam!"

"Don't go, Bill! It's no man's duty to run such risks."

Then, the clear, decided voice of the brave volunteer gave answer:

"I thank you, pards, but as I have said that I would go, I will keep my word!"

"You always do that, Cody!" said the division chief, earnestly.

"That he does!" was echoed by a dozen voices.

CHAPTER III.

THE START.

ANXIOUS to get away from the laudations of his comrades, Buffalo Bill left the general rendezvous, where all at the station were wont to congregate, and made his way to his own little cabin.

There he was joined, a few moments after, by Luke Langdon, chief of the Overland division running westward from Laramie.

"Well, Cody, I owe you the deepest gratitude for your offering to go on this desperate trail—so desperate, in fact, that I am sorry you are the man to take it, for, without wishing to discourage you, I fear the chances are about one in a hundred of your ever returning."

"About one in a hundred, I should say, sir, but I'll take the odds."

"When no other man would—just as you have just gone the rounds of the posts with the dispatches I gave you, but which no other volunteered to deliver."

"Yes, sir, and have delivered the returns from the commanding officers to your clerk."

"You got through all right, I am glad to see, and returned two days sooner than I expected you could."

"I had nothing to detain me, sir; but, while I was away, strange to say, I heard the Big Horn Basin spoken of."

"Indeed? What was said about it?"

"There had been a lieutenant and eight men killed up there, sir."

"They were sent to find some trace of a band of miners, thirty in number, who had gone there a couple of years ago, but from whom nothing had been heard—doubtless the party your brother was with."

"Undoubtedly; and the officer and his men were killed, you say?"

"Yes, sir; not one survived."

"How was it known?"

"California Joe brought the news to Fort Steele while I was there."

"How were they killed?"

"As they did not return he took their trail and tracked them to the Big Horn, where he found their bones, for the coyotes had picked them clean."

"Their bones were there; their weapons and accouterments also—saddles, bridles and all; and the mystery was what had befallen them, for, had Indians killed them, the redskins would have taken the horses and weapons."

"Then, again, the troop could not have starved to death, for provisions were found among their traps."

"If white men had killed them they would have robbed them, and so California Joe could not explain the mystery. It was all too deep for him."

"And, in the face of this, you are still willing to go, Cody?"

"Yes, sir, I'll go."

"You are a brave fellow, and I am tempted to say you shall not go."

"But, I very well know that you are the only man who could do the work. If any one else went I would never expect to see him return, and I do look for you to turn up somehow, for you are the one big luck pard, as the men all call you, of the Overland and the trails."

"I'll make the try, sir."

"And I most sincerely thank you. Leonard is my brother, as I said, and the only near relative I have left, and so I wish to answer his appeal for help."

"I am sure that he and his two comrades have a big sum in gold, and yet they will not leave it there and try to come here, nor will they trust the secret to more than one person, as I have stated."

"You have decided to go, and I will see that you are not forgotten if you get through all right, while the same sum offered shall be sent to your mother, should you fall, which Heaven forbid!"

"Now, pick out your coach and select your horses. Make up your outfit to suit yourself. You can have the best the camp affords."

"Thank you, sir. There are but three men left, you say?"

"Yes. My brother, Leonard Langdon, and two others."

"I will take saddles and bridles along then, sir, for three, besides my own, should we have to desert the coach, as may be the case."

"Do just as you deem best, Bill," was the answer; and then the two jotted down a list of just what was to be taken along.

The next morning Buffalo Bill began preparations for his long and perilous journey into the unknown Basin.

A coach was selected and put in the hands of the station blacksmith to go over it thoroughly, and an additional large and small wheel were strapped against the back in the boot.

Extra irons for those that might break, extra collars, traces and other pieces of harness were put into a bag, and blankets, provisions, saddles, bridles and weapons, with plenty of ammunition, were all bundled up securely and strapped on top, or in the boot.

Leather bags were also taken, in which to bring back the gold, and the interior of the coach was fitted up as the daring stage-driver's camp on wheels.

Buffalo Bill had selected four of the best horses at the station for the wilderness drive, besides two of his trustiest riding horses, trained to follow, and which could be used to hitch-in should one of the coach animals become disabled or lost.

A great deal of suppressed excitement was felt in camp, at the venturesome expedition of the daring scout and trail-rider, and all the men shook their heads in an anxious way when the odds against his success and safe return were considered.

Still, three lives were at stake, and, as all his comrades admitted, Cody was just the man to risk life to save life—to conquer all danger and obstacles if any one could.

He was to start out that afternoon, after dinner, and the whole camp was there to see him off.

The led horses were tied behind, and

when all was in readiness, Buffalo Bill came sauntering along from his cabin, prepared for his journey.

The men greeted him with a mighty shout, which he acknowledged by raising his hat; and, grasping his hand warmly, Division Agent Langdon said, in a voice that trembled:

"You have the map and letter, Cody, and all is ready."

"Good-by, and God bless you! God bless you!"

The words were heard by the crowd, and as Buffalo Bill sprung lightly to the box and grasped the reins, a chorus of "Good-byes!" and "God bless you!" went up, and followed the bold driver as long as he was in sight of the station.

CHAPTER IV.

THE LONE CAMP.

"Now in my mind there is more to fear from lawless men in the camps, than from the redskins and the dangers of the trail and Big Horn Basin."

"I must be on the watch for men who would like to know my secret and get that gold for themselves, and there were in the camp, I very well understand, who are likely to make a try for it, unless I have greatly misjudged them."

So said Buffalo Bill to himself, as he drove on out of the camp and headed his team from the Overland Trail directly into the unbroken wilderness.

To a man of his great skill and experience in bordercraft, he did not feel that he was compelled to follow the path laid down for him in Leonard Langdon's map, and which had been the one traveled by the thirty miners two years before, when they had daringly, led by the love for gold, penetrated the wild and then entirely unknown region of the Big Horn Basin, a perfect *terra incognita* even to the topographical surveyors, although now known as one of the grandest parts of our continent, rich in minerals of all kinds, imposing in scenery, and soon, as settlers are crowding in, to become a Garden Spot of the mighty West—a Wonderland indeed, with its grand mountains, its verdant valleys, its big rivers and almost exhaustless resources.*

But, as the prospectors had carried in with them several wagons, Buffalo Bill decided to follow their trail as nearly as practicable, yet cutting across when his knowledge of the "lay of the land" convinced him that he could save a few miles by so doing.

With a splendid team of wheel horses and two good animals in the lead, a complete outfit, weapons enough for half a dozen men, and bound upon a mission of humanity, Buffalo Bill felt light-hearted, almost elate at the prospect before him as he drove on his way.

He held back his eager team, not wishing to press them, and made only fifteen miles to his night camp, after leaving the station.

When he had unharnessed and staked out his horses, cooked his supper and made all ready for the night, instead of "turning in," in the coach, as all had been prepared for, he took his blankets and a couple of rifles, and went off to a point he had selected for his resting-place, and from which he could command a view of his entire camp.

He had thrown a log on the fire, which would light up about the coach, so he could see any one approaching it, and he knew that he was so well trained that the very presence would awaken him, did foes come near to put him out of the way and thus getting possession of the map and outfit, go on to find Leonard Langdon and his companions, not to rescue them, but, quite the contrary—to end their lives and get possession of their gold.

When on the alert and on duty, Buffalo

*The Big Horn Basin is situated in Wyoming, adjacent to the Yellowstone National Park, and to the north lies the ill-fated Custer battle-field. Sheridan, a prosperous city, now of 3,000 inhabitants, is not far from the boundary of the Basin, and settlers are rushing in to find homes, where, at the time of which I write but few white men had ever trod. The Basin is very rich in all kinds of minerals, the soil is fertile, and "Cody City" named after Buffalo Bill, one of the first men who dared to penetrate its wilds—promises to soon be a flourishing center. THE AUTHOR.

Bill had a way of waking up every hour. If only for a minute, it was enough, if danger was about, and his mind that evening while he was awake, was keenly attentive to just what was going on.

He had thrice awakened after short naps, glanced about him and returned to sleep again, hoping for undisturbed repose. But from that slumber he suddenly started.

At once all his nerves were on the alert, and his eyes swept over the space which the fire dimly lighted, taking in every foot of it.

While thus looking, he saw a dark object come into view.

A moment more and the outline came before him, and he muttered:

"One of my horses has gotten loose—Strange, too, for I staked them most securely."

He was about to leave his blankets to go out and catch the estray, when, with a quick movement he darted back into the shadow.

Something had caught his eye.

His gaze was riveted upon the horse, and he saw that the animal was slowly moving nearer the camp-fire, and advancing in a very peculiar manner.

He was not grazing as he went, but going a few steps and halting, and several times half-turned about.

But, it was not upon the horse the eyes of Buffalo Bill were now fixed.

He had discovered that there was something behind the animal.

That something was a human form!

The man kept close up against the hind legs of the horse, and seemed to have a rope in the animal's mouth and be directing him with it.

To an ordinary man it would have simply appeared that the horse was loose, had strayed into camp and was to be caught and staked out again; but to the experienced eye of Buffalo Bill had been revealed that the horse was approaching the coach for a purpose.

That purpose could only be to take the life of the lone camper, supposed to be sleeping within the vehicle.

CHAPTER V.

RUSE AGAINST RUSE.

BUFFALO BILL smiled quietly to himself as he saw the danger he had escaped by camping away from the coach.

The ruse of his midnight visitor was a clever one to kill, but it must be met by one equally as clever.

The lone driver was, in a measure, master of the situation, as he had already discovered his danger and his foe was in view before him.

A shot from where he lay would have killed the would-be-assassin, now hiding behind the horse, but the watcher would await developments.

Buffalo Bill was not the person to take advantage of a man wholly at his mercy, even though that man had come there to murder him. He would at least wait until he was sure just what the other intended to do.

And so he waited.

The midnight visitor, meanwhile, continued his tortuous course with the horse, the animal not going just as he wished him to do, but swaying from side to side.

Nearer and nearer the horse was urged, the man carefully keeping closely hidden behind him.

At last, when within sixty feet of the coach, the animal was halted and allowed to graze, while his master went around to one side, the horse between him and the coach.

The fire was flickering dimly, but Buffalo Bill saw that his foe was armed with a rifle—saw him rest the weapon across the horse's neck and aim it toward the coach.

Then, suddenly, a piece of wood of the camp-fire broke and fell and there burst up a bright flame.

It revealed the horse distinctly, but to one looking from the coach the hidden foe would not have been seen.

But the man seemed startled by this unlooked-for aid to his intended victim, and he uttered a sound in imitation of the snort of a horse in alarm.

He stood there, plainly revealed to the watching Buffalo Bill, his rifle leveled, and ready to shoot the man whom he expected to see leap out of the coach.

There was no longer any doubt in the

mind of Buffalo Bill that the man had followed him there to slay him.

Was he alone?

That question the driver could not answer; but probably not alone, as it was a bold venture for a person to make alone.

As the fellow's face was slightly turned, and the firelight, growing brighter, revealed his form and features, Buffalo Bill recognized a man known as Desperate Dave—one of the most reckless ruffians on the Overland, and who went from camp to camp living by his wits and spreading terror everywhere, for he was of immense stature, strong as a buffalo, a good shot with revolver and rifle, an expert with the knife, and one to use any weapon to the death.

Desperate Dave and Buffalo Bill had never been friends, for the Pony Rider would not be bullied by the desperado, and once they had had a fair test, without arms, for mastery.

In this trial of muscle Cody had been the victor, in spite of the brute strength of the border bully, who had never forgiven him, and had been heard to say that "some day they would have a try with weapons, and then there would be a new grave dug and the head board would have on it the name of W. F. Cody."

Buffalo Bill had been warned of this boast or threat, so was constantly on the watch for him, especially when he heard that Desperate Dave was carving a board for him to put at the head of his grave!

Now, the desperado was there to kill him, and then in possession of the outfit, go on himself after the gold.

As he had recognized the man, Buffalo Bill seemed pleased, for, as the ruffian had no pards, Desperate Dave must be alone.

Again was the snort given by the man, to arouse the supposed sleeper in the coach, and then Buffalo Bill called out:

"Hi! Desperate Dave, want me?"

The startled man uttered a cry, turned quickly in the direction from whence the voice had come, and, losing his nerve, fired at random.

The bullet struck the Pony Rider's blankets, and was instantly answered by a second report, and the ball from Cody's rifle was buried in the brain of the desperado.

The man fell, and the startled horse would have bounded away but the rope about the fallen body held him.

Buffalo Bill did not leave his retreat, however; there might be another foe—a comrade of the ruffian.

After a long while the driver began to go the rounds of the camp, and stumbling upon something he found it to be a board and a bundle.

It was the head-board Desperate Dave had carved for him, and the bundle was the man's outfit.

No one was with him, and, as the desperado never rode a horse, he must have followed on foot after him, for he was known as a wonderful pedestrian.

Then Buffalo Bill recalled what had been told him—that Desperate Dave had left the station the night before, saying he was going to one of the other camps.

In reality he had left to kill Buffalo Bill and drive the coach on its lone trail to find those three miners and get their gold.

CHAPTER VI.

FACING DEATH.

BUFFALO BILL threw the bundle, fastened to the board, down by the fire, placed the body near and covering it with a blanket; then he led the horse back to the others and staked him out.

Returning to the camp-fire he picked up the bundle and examined it.

It contained some clothing, an extra pair of revolvers, knife, some ammunition and provisions.

There was also a coffee-pot, tin-cup, plate and frying pan and a buckskin bag containing several hundred dollars in gold, silver and paper money.

But the board?

It was intended for the head-board of a grave, rounded at top, sharp at the bottom and made of cedar.

On this the desperado had carved with considerable skill, the following:

"TO THE MEMORY

OF

BUFFALO BILL—WM. F. CODY,

Pony Rider on the Overland Trail,

KILLED BY

DESPERATE DAVE."

Buffalo Bill's face wore a peculiar expression as he read this inscription, and then he muttered dryly:

"I'm something of a wood carver myself, and I'll just add a P. S. to that tragic tale."

With this he took out his knife, held the board firmly between his knees and began to cut out letters, and with even greater skill than Desperate Dave had shown.

It was a couple of hours before he completed his task, and then, holding the board up so that the fire-light fell full upon it, the following was revealed, cut just below the first lettering:

"P. S. The above is away off. Desperate Dave lies in this grave, slain by the one whom he came to murder."

"BUFFALO BILL."

Having completed his work Buffalo Bill returned to his blankets and slept undisturbed until dawn.

At daybreak he arose and taking a pick and shovel from the coach, he dug a grave, and wrapping the body of the desperado in his blanket buried him decently.

The head-board was placed in position and stones put on the grave, to keep off the coyotes.

All this done, the lone driver, who had so successfully overcome his first danger, had his breakfast, hitched up his team and start—once more upon his untried and unmarked trail.

The fact that he had met and overcome one danger did not make him less cautious, for he still expected he might be either followed or ambushed, while within a couple of days' drive of the camps.

Of course the driving was bad at times, very bad, and difficult and the matchless driver had to pick his way among innumerable obstacles—to avert disaster to his horses and his coach.

But, he was an expert with the reins, his team was a splendid one, and when once again on the trail, he turned his two led horses loose, knowing that they would follow, as they had been trained to do, and which they did most faithfully, though frequently hanging back in the rear to graze along the trail as they came to bits of good grass.

Thus the morning passed with some ten miles put behind him. A halt was made at noon of over an hour, Buffalo Bill wishing to break his horses in by easy stages, at first, for the long trail ahead.

Once more hitching up and mounting his box, he started upon his way to suddenly draw rein as his keen eye caught sight of tracks, plainly visible, crossing the way he was going!

Instantly he dismounted and closely examined these "signs."

"They have not been made half an hour, and go over in that direction."

"There were two horses, and they were both shod, which proves they are not Indians but from the camps, and, of course, I am the one they are after!"

"Well, I have to go ahead, but I will keep my eye open for trouble, for I feel it in my bones that it is coming."

"Will it be an ambush or an open fight, I wonder?"

With this Buffalo Bill again mounted his box and drove on.

His two extra horses were out of sight, in the rear, but he hoped they would soon overtake him.

Soon he came to a narrow and winding canyon, where the way, for there was no trail, led along a rocky shelf under a cliff; and, abruptly turning a sharp bend, the start of his leaders revealed, before he could see, that there was danger ahead.

A few seconds more and he came suddenly upon two horsemen barring his way.

Both were masked; both held their revolvers at a level, and one of them called out:

"Halt, Buffalo Bill, for we have come for that outfit!"

CHAPTER VII.

TERMS REFUSED

"If you want this outfit, pards, show your right and I'll give in if I think best."

Such was the cool reply of Buffalo Bill to the demand of the two masked horsemen that barred his further progress, and one of whom had boldly said that they had come to take the coach he was driving.

What it was that had kept them from firing upon him, instead of making the demand in words, Buffalo Bill did not know, but the fact did not escape him that they had not used their revolvers to enforce their words.

His cool reply seemed to nonplus them for an instant, but soon one replied, the man who had before spoken:

"Our authority is the revolver."

"You are covered, so yield, for we do not wish to kill you Buffalo Bill?"

"Why not?"

Again they were nonplused.

The driver repeated the question with:

"Life is cheap out here, so why do you value mine?"

"We have reasons for not killing you, Buffalo Bill."

"I have none for not killing you, save that you have the drop on me and I cannot get my gun."

"We shall hold it."

"But come, get down from your box and your life depends upon whether you do as we tell you."

"All alone?"

"There are more of us near."

"I don't believe it, for you would have shown your full hand in holding me up, if you had more."

"We are enough."

"From the camps, boys?"

The manner and questioning of the lone driver seemed to disconcert them.

Though apparently in their power it appeared as if the two men did not feel just sure of their prey.

Was there unlooked for aid behind his calm manner and questions?

Was he in reality guying them?

It certainly looked so.

"Do you intend to obey, Buffalo Bill?"

"Suppose I refuse?"

"You sound your death-knell by the refusal."

"If I obey?"

"Then we can come to terms."

"What terms?"

"Say what you will do, first."

"If I had a man covered, as you have me, I'd make him do the saying, not ask him."

"Well, you shall say. Quick! do you agree to our terms, or not?"

"Don't know what they are."

The two men glanced at each other almost hopelessly, it seemed, though the masks hid their faces completely.

But Buffalo Bill was scrutinizing them most critically, their horses, dress, forms and all, and drawing his own conclusions as to their identity.

Then they uttered a few low words, and one said:

"I'll tell you what our terms are, and if it was any other man than you, we'd do our talking with our guns."

"Thanks."

"We have come here for a purpose, and not wishing to kill you, we are willing to offer you terms."

"Make your offer."

"We know where you are going."

"Well?"

"And what for?"

"Yes."

"You have a map and papers to tell you where to find your men."

"Think so?"

"They were given to you."

"By whom?"

"Langdon."

"Then you are from the camps, eh?"

The men winced under this, but one replied:

"Never mind where we are from: we know all."

"Yes, it seems so; but why not, when you refused to volunteer for the trail, when asked, preferring to follow after, rob me, get the secret and then leaving the miners to perish, skip off with their gold."

"It's about what you'll do."

"You know you utter a lie when you say that."

"Don't be too fresh, Buffalo Bill, for we has you covered."

"That may be, but you do not know the secret I have, and fools you must be, if you think I brought that map and papers along for any cut throat to hold me up and take them from me. Oh no, I studied my lesson until I knew it well."

This was a dead-center shot of Buffalo Bill's, and it told.

He well knew that if the men thought he had destroyed the map and papers, after impressing all upon his memory, his life would at least be secure, as they would not dare destroy all chances of learning the secret by killing him.

So he sat on the box, smiling serenely, and seeing that the two men were impressed by what he had said.

While they were talking together in a low tone he had his eyes upon them, watching for the slightest chance in his favor.

At last one of them said:

"Well, Cody, we have decided to offer you an equal share with ourselves, if you will guide us to the spot where that gold is, and to kill you if you refuse."

"Fire away then, for I refuse," was the determined response.

CHAPTER VIII.

DUMB RESCUERS.

BUFFALO BILL was a man who always took big chances.

From boyhood he has not only been a student of human nature, but also of situations and motives, and time and again, when his life has hung by a hair, he has made his knowledge of mankind turn in his favor.

He confessed to himself, as he sat on the box, that he was in a very precarious situation.

With the proposition of Luke Langdon sprung upon them, and no time for the men to get together, the good to themselves, the bad likewise, and talk over the matter, and what they would do, there had not been one volunteer for the work.

Had they had time to discuss it, perhaps here and there a bold fellow might have been found to make the attempt at rescuing the three gold miners alone.

Certain it was, from later developments, some of the wicked ones would have put their heads together and the result would have been for one to have volunteered and a comrade or two have been found to dog his steps and wipe him out for what there was to gain.

But then, Luke Langdon knew his men thoroughly and had several volunteered he had in his mind, he would not have accepted them, knowing their motive would be to work for themselves alone.

Now Buffalo Bill had seen his suspicions verified, that he would be shadowed by one or more of the hard ones in the camps, to force from him his secret.

Desperate Dave had played the sneak game, to kill him by night, rob him, and, thus securing the map, go on alone.

He had been disposed of.

But Buffalo Bill faced two desperate men, whom he had made believe that he had left the map behind, and committed the directions to memory, and believing this they would not kill him, unless driven to it at the last moment, when they felt they were utterly foiled and must not allow him to return and report enough about them to lead to the discovery of their identity.

Feeling sure that the two masked men had not played their last card, Buffalo Bill had taken the chances of boldly refusing their offer of terms if he would turn traitor to Luke Langdon.

All the while he was watching for the slightest loop-hole of escape.

As the men did not fire, but sat upon their horses, holding their revolvers, as if yet undecided, Buffalo Bill said, indifferently:

"What is the matter? Are you afraid to shoot?"

"See here, Buffalo Bill, as we said before, we don't wish to kill you—"

"Chicken-hearted, or don't wish to kill the goose that can lay the golden egg—which?"

"We don't wish to kill you, because we have nothing against you; you have never done us any harm, and we like you."

"But we are in this country for what we can get out of it, as you are."

"In an honest way, yes, but not by throat-cutting and picking the pockets of dead men."

"Never mind how, we are in it for gold, and we know enough to feel sure those three miners have got lots of it."

"They are there because they can't get away without horses, and are without food, so stick to their gold, hoping for aid to come."

"In some mysterious way Luke Langdon got word from his brother; the letter and map were stuck upon his door, he says, but who put it there?"

"Now, somebody has done so who is friendly to the miners, and the question is who can it be?"

"Can it be one of them who has done away with his pards, visited the camps, and played that game to have a coach sent after the gold, and he is waiting to kill the driver and get all himself, taking it in to some other station on the Overland?"

"I really can't tell you," and Buffalo Bill yawned in a tired way.

"Well, we are out for that gold, and you alone can lead us to it, and so we will give you half of it if you will do so, or kill you if you refuse. So, think well before you speak."

"No need to think, for I prefer to be an honest and square man, and threats of death will not drive me one inch off the trail I believe to be the right one."

"I tell you now that I am going to risk a fight with you, for I am not so unprotected as you seem to suppose," and the two men failed to see that Buffalo Bill had a revolver lying right by his hand on the seat, and which he was only watching his chance to seize and open fire!

But, they took his words another way, and his bold stand caused them to think that their fear must have cause for foundation, that a secret guard was following the coach until it got well away from the camps.

Just then came the clatter of hoofs back on the trail, and with yells of rage and disappointment the two men fired, either to kill or to frighten the daring driver, and wheeled their horses in flight just as the two extra animals came tearing along at full speed to overtake the coach.

Then, Buffalo Bill opened fire.

CHAPTER IX.

A COMPLETE SURPRISE.

THOSE who know Buffalo Bill best, who have seen him as a scout upon the border, as an Indian-fighter and trapper of law-breakers, as the writer has, know well that he never fires wantonly at a human being, be it a red-skin or a man ever so wicked.

When forced to take life, the necessities of the situation have demanded it, and often and often has he taken most desperate chances of being killed by sparing a foe rather than bringing him down by one of his unerring shots.

Relying in a great degree upon his phenomenal strength, quickness of action and nerve he uses a deadly weapon only when it would be madness not to do so.

When he heard, in the scene described in the last chapter, the clatter of hoofs behind him, he knew that the two lagging horses were coming on at a run.

Then he recalled his words, and saw in an instant how well the coming hoofs had chimed in with what he had said about not being wholly unprotected.

He saw how the two men regarded the sound, as help coming, and smiled as they turned in flight.

Their two shots at him as they wheeled came uncomfortably near, but whether fired to frighten or kill, he gave them the benefit of the doubt and grasping his own revolver, would not himself aim to take the life of either of them.

He wanted no more trouble with them, however, wished to scare them well off, to put them out of the way of doing further mischief, when they should see that the rescuers were dumb beasts, and so, with a regret at having to fire upon the innocent ob-

jects to his adventure, he ran his eye along the revolver-sights and pulled trigger.

It was a long shot and a fine one, for the horse furthest away staggered and went down.

As though confident what the result would be, Cody at once turned his revolver upon the other horse.

That the shot struck, the bound of the animal showed, but a second and a third were fired before the horse fell.

With a yell, Buffalo Bill shouted out.

"Come on, boys, for they are dismounted now, so catch them before they reach those rocks!"

The two fugitives had gone down with their horses, but they were up and flying for life in a second.

And fear added speed, and they did not even look behind them as they ran, hoping to gain some rocks not far away that were on the edge of a canyon.

Gaining the shelter they disappeared, while Buffalo Bill kept up his shouts, in half a dozen feigned voices, and drove on to where the two horses lay.

One was alive, but a shot ended his sufferings, the lone driver saying in a sympathetic tone:

"I am mighty sorry, poor fellow, but the dumb brute must be sacrificed for human kind."

Dismounting from the box he remarked:

"These saddles may be useful further on—at least if I ever get back to the camps with them they will tell who owned them, and see if I am right in my suspicion of who those two gentlemen of the road are."

"Dismounted, and without food, they'll have to make their way back to the camps with all speed."

As he talked Buffalo Bill stripped the dead horses of their saddles and bridles, threw them upon the top of the coach, and mounting the box again drove on.

"Come, horses, if those fellows find out I had no help they may follow to attack me in camp to-night, so we must make a good day of it."

With this the two extra horses were caught and tied on behind the coach, the lone driver fearing that they might lag behind and be captured by the two road-agents, who would thus be well mounted again, and could readily pursue him.

The trail was fortunately quite good, and the team made a long distance that day, a short halt only being made for dinner, and Buffalo Bill continuing on to a night camp until he felt sure he was beyond where his two foes could reach him before darkness set in.

That they could not follow his trail after nightfall he well knew, and if he could get beyond their endurance the first night he had no fear of them after that, and in fact no dread of further danger from any one in the camps.

It was just sunset when he turned into a pretty valley through which ran a stream of clearest water, the ideal spot for a camp, for the grass grew luxuriantly there and wood was plentiful.

Buffalo Bill had just stripped the harness from his tired horses, and was about to stake them out, when like an apparition a human form appeared before him, and with the stake ropes in each hand he had no time to draw a revolver.

CHAPTER X.

THE MYSTERIOUS CHINEE.

THE first thought of Buffalo Bill, at beholding a form rise like an apparition before him, was that he had been fairly caught.

Recognizing the one he confronted, and, though not knowing just what he might expect, he said in an off-hand way:

"Ho, Yellow Jack, off your trail, aren't you?"

"Yellow Jack know trail—he allee lightee," was the confident answer.

The speaker was a Chinese, tall, of athletic build, dressed in the garb of his country, save that he wore moccasins and a slouch hat.

If armed, the loose shirt he wore concealed his weapons.

His face was a bold one, yet sly withal, the innocent look concealing the cunning that lurked beneath.

But it was an intelligent countenance, with more in it than his people are wont to express, and he was as calm as a May moon, though found a long way from camp or other human being save Buffalo Bill.

The latter knew the man as a Chinaman who bore the names of the "Mysterious Heathen," "Doctor Sly" and "Yellow Jack."

He was a mystery in camp, having been rescued by Buffalo Bill from a village of Indians who had long held him prisoner.

The men in the camps wished to hang him as a renegade, saying that he was a willing captive of the Indians, but Buffalo Bill had stood his friend and prevented his being strung up.

Soon after the Chinaman added mystery to his life by killing a desperado who had attacked him, and the pluck and deadly aim he had exhibited had won him friends.

Looking about the camps in apparent idleness for some time, he one day surprised all by receiving a box by the Overland coach, containing flat irons, soap and other articles for a laundry, and then it was discovered that he had been at work making tubs, tables and other things to make himself comfortable and set up business in the cabin of the desperado he had killed, and whom he had claimed to be the heir of.

No one disputed the claim, and the "Chinese laundry" of Yellow Jack began to thrive, all the men along the line giving him their washing to do and paying his exorbitant prices.

But there was one exception, for Buffalo Bill was not his patron.

He had sought to be, and had taken him his clothes to wash, and they had been well done.

But when Buffalo Bill sought to pay him, Yellow Jack refused his money; all entreaties were unavailing, and the Pony Rider left, feeling that he could take him no more work, as he wished to pay for the saving of his life by squaring a laundry bill.

After that there was a coldness between the Pony Rider and Yellow Jack, the latter really showing an ugly feeling toward his rescuer which caused some of the latter's friends to warn him to keep an eye upon the Mysterious Heathen.

Another mystery about the Chinaman was his knowledge of surgery and medicine, and with his laundry outfit had come a case of surgical instruments and another of medicines.

As he soon showed that he was skilled in surgery and medicine, he was given the name of "Doctor Sly," and it was not long before the Heathen Chinese became quite an important personage in camp, frequently going to see wounded and sick patients a long distance on each side of his abiding place.

Yellow Jack was also a gambler, and a successful one, and all knew that he was rapidly laying up gold through his various callings.

But, strangest of all, when Buffalo Bill, the man who had saved his life on two separate occasions, was taken quite ill, one day, Luke Langdon had not been able to prevail upon Yellow Jack to go and see him, and so the Pony Rider had really begun to regard him as a foe, indeed.

There were rumors in camp that Yellow Jack had been a "bad man," that he had really gone among the Indians and been a leader of them against the whites, that he cheated at cards, was a Chinese magician and would commit any crime, and the result was that he had come to be greatly feared. Some few had suggested that he be hanged some night, and his cabin raided, but this would not be listened to, for he was most useful to all as a laundryman, and he was far more valuable as a doctor and surgeon.

No, the Mysterious Heathen must be tolerated, as no one could be found to supply his place.

Strong as a lion, quick as a cat, supposed to be armed, though he never revealed a weapon, there were few of those who did not like him, bold enough to face him in a fight; and thus he went on in the even tenor of his way.

Such was the man whom Buffalo Bill now found confronting him, alone, and two days' journey from the camp.

Why was he there was the question flashing through the mind of Buffalo Bill.

CHAPTER XI.

YELLOW JACK'S WARNING.

BUFFALO BILL regarded the Chinaman with a peculiar look, one that seemed to penetrate heart and brain.

Then he said in his dry way:

"You may be 'altee lightee' in camp, where half the men are afraid of your shadow, believing you are allied to the devil, but out here you are all wrong, and don't you forget it."

"Me altee lightee here altee samee, and don't Buffalo Billee forgettee."

"Yellow Jackee not much footee, altee samee 'Melican man tinkee so.'"

Buffalo Bill laughed in spite of the situation, and retorted:

"No, Yellow Jack, the man who takes you for a fool is off his trail; but, I want to know what you are doing here, so far from camp?"

"Come tellee you somet'ing wantee know."

"Ah! What is it?"

"Buffalo Billee go after sick 'Melican man?"

"Yes."

"Sick man havee gold?"

"So it is said."

"Go Big Hornee Basin?"

"Yes."

"Buffalo Billee altee samee alone?"

"True."

"Brave—much brave, but no fightee five."

"Ah! What do you mean?"

"Yellow Jackee come from campee for don't want Buffalo Billee to die."

"Come tellee him five bad 'Melican manee going to killee."

"You have come to tell me this?"

The Chinese nodded.

"That five men are going to kill me?"

Again a nod.

"When did you leave camp?"

"Last nightee."

"How did you come?"

"On footee."

"You came here on foot?"

"Allee samee."

"To warn me of danger?"

"Allee samee."

"Who sent you?"

"Yellow Jackee."

"How did you know about these men?"

"Yellow Jackee hear talkee."

"Who are they?"

"Rip Rappee—Scar Face Samee—Wild Tomee—Bony Bob—and Scrapee," and Yellow Jack rattled the names off as though they were one.

"Go slow, Yellow Jack, and let me catch them—Rip Raps was one."

"Yes, Rip Rappee."

"Scar Face Sam and Wild Tom are three."

"Yes, allee samee."

"And the other two?"

"Bony Bobee and Scrapee."

"Bony Bob and Scraps?"

"Allee lightee."

"A hard lot, and all herders. Just the gang I would have hit upon; but they were off herding cattle when I left."

"Wild Tomee there; he know; tellee pard, Lankee Pete, he going back getee men and killee you at Indian Spring, for you habee go that way—he know, for he with Indian one time."

"Ah! he was, was he?"

"Allee lightee."

"And you overheard him tell Lanky Pete that he was going back to the grazing-grounds, get his pards and ambush me at Indian Spring, which is as far north as any of us from the camps have been."

"Yellow Jackee hear."

"And you came to warn me?"

The Chinaman nodded.

"Does any one else know of your coming?"

"No."

"They will miss you from camp and search for you."

"No, Yellow Jackee allee lightee in camp, allee lightee here—no miss Yellow Jackee," was the rather obscure response.

"How did you find your way here?"

"Yellow Jackee live with Indians; he know."

"Ah yes; I forgot that you had gone all over this country the two years you were with the Indians."

"Jackee know allee samee."

"And you came on foot?"

"Yes, on footee."

"I know you are noted as a runner; but why did you wish to save me now, when you would not help me when I was sick?"

"Jackee friend of Buffalo Billee, don't wantee bad 'Melican man know, allee samee, for Chinaman habee ear, hear muchee talkee, keep tong' stillee."

"Ah! I think I begin to understand you better now, Yellow Jack; you are really my friend?"

The Chinaman's smile was one that Buffalo Bill never forgot, it was so full of honest friendship for him and pleasure at being understood.

At once Buffalo Bill extended his hand, and it was warmly grasped.

"Well, Jack, we'll have some supper now, and you camp with me to-night."

"Habe supper; but no campee—go back to-nightee."

"Through the darkness and a trailless country? Oh, no!"

"Yellow Jackee allee lightee; he know; he campee in morning."

"But, you are not armed, have nothing to eat with you and are on foot."

"Me allee lightee; Yellow Jackee not much footee."

There was something in the cunning, fearless look and odd reply of the Chinaman that made Buffalo Bill laugh and gave him confidence in the Celestial, so he said:

"All right, Yellow Jack; you know best. Now to supper."

They had supper together, talked matters over as well as was possible with Yellow Jack's "pigeon English," and later, Buffalo Bill saw him start on his way through a trackless country, alone, apparently unarmed, and with the night intensely dark.

"That Chinaman has doubtless saved my life; he is indeed a mystery to me, and well named the Mysterious Chinese," and so saying, Buffalo Bill turned in for the night—as before—not sleeping in the coach.

CHAPTER XII.

THE CHINEE AND THE SPORT.

AFTER Buffalo Bill had driven away upon his lone, long and daring trail into the Big Horn Basin, Langdon, the division agent, felt both regret and satisfaction.

He was sorry that Buffalo Bill had been the man to take the risk, and he felt pleased that he had been able to answer his brother's appeal and send to rescue him.

His confidence in Buffalo Bill made him feel hopeful that success would attend his desperate venture, a lone man, driving a coach, going into a country where even a small band of redskins dare not venture.

Keeping a watch on the men in camp, after the departure of Buffalo Bill, for he half feared that he might be followed, to be attacked upon his return when he would have the gold, he saw no indication of such intention.

Desperate Dave was reported to him as sick in his cabin, and the only men absent from the camp were the two regular hunters who supplied the messes with game, and they were away nearly half of the time.

The herders were five in number, and would drive a herd of cattle and a number of horses out to some valley where pasturage was good, and keep them there, coming in every ten days to report and for orders, driving in the cattle needed for beef, and fresh animals, while they would take back those that needed rest.

There was one man in camp, however, whom Langdon particularly kept his eye upon.

He was as much a mystery as was Yellow Jack, and spent his time in the Pony camps for a distance of five hundred miles.

He called himself Dare Golden but whether it was his real name no one knew, and he seemed to like being called "Trumps" and "Sport."

Golden was a striking looking person, a combination of gambler, plainsman, dandy and desperado.

He was tall and well formed, erect as a soldier, dressed in gray sombrero, handsome

top-boots, black broadcloth pants, velvet jacket and white silk shirt and scarf.

He wore diamonds, had long hair, a mustache that curled up at the ends, and carried no weapons in sight, but had been known to find them with startling suddenness and use them with deadliest intent when it had so suited him, for he was rather fond of his title as a "man-killer."

Plenty of money he always had, and he was a winner in betting nine times out of ten.

From the first he had taken to Buffalo Bill, but the latter had received his advances coldly, and after awhile they were known to be foes. Such was the individual whom Luke Langdon watched closely, after the departure of Buffalo Bill, for somehow he feared him.

But, Trumps went on in the even tenor of his way after Buffalo Bill's departure, and one afternoon sauntered into the laundry of Yellow Jack.

He was the best customer the Chinaman had, the latter being his tailor as well as his laundryman, keeping his clothes well cleaned and ironed.

It was the third day after the departure of Buffalo Bill, and Yellow Jack was hard at work at his ironing, a revolver on the table near his irons, for he always kept one there.

Seating himself upon the only stool in the cabin, Dare Golden said:

"See here, Yellow Jack, you have got to do something for me."

"Allee lightee, Trumpee."

"You know this country better than even Buffalo Bill, for you roamed all over it with the redskins."

"Allee samee, yes."

"You can head Buffalo Bill off on his return; that is, guide me and several men whom I will take with me to where we can ambush the coach, kill all who are with it and get the gold, and I'll pay you well."

"Me no tief!" shouted Yellow Jack, his face turning livid with anger as he sprung quickly toward the revolver near his irons, and stretched forth his hand to grasp it.

But his hand was checked as it almost rested upon the weapon by the gambler's ringing words:

"Hold! Hands off that gun, Chinaman, or you are a dead man!"

And yet the Overland Sport showed no weapon to enforce his words.

CHAPTER XIII.

A GAME OF BLUFF.

AT the stern command of the sport, the Chinaman did not touch the revolver, which was within several inches of his fingers.

He simply said, and in a tone of exceeding innocence:

"Wantee move revolvee—put a on shelf."

"Just wait until I leave your lay-out, and then you can, but it's the signal for your death if you touch it while I am here."

"Allee lightee, no touchee," was the philanthropic response.

"No wantee go deadee."

"Now tell me why you got mad because I asked you to be my guide, when you could get rich by doing so?"

"Yeller Jack no tief man; he goodee Chinaman."

"Yes, a Chinese is like an Injun—good only when dead."

"Me goodee livee allee samee."

"You think so?"

Yellow Jack nodded a cunning response.

"You do not like Buffalo Bill?"

"No! He no likee Chinaman."

"Then why do you refuse to be my guide?"

"No likee 'Melican man; no wantee killee."

"You don't, eh? Well, that is where we differ, for, if I don't like a man, he's got to get out—kill me or turn up his toes."

"Trumpee no likee Buffalo Billee?"

"No! I hate him!" and the words were uttered almost savagely.

The Chinaman started as though frightened, but said:

"Buffalo Billee hurtee you?"

"No; and I shall take good care that he does not."

"But he pretends to be so honest, don't wish to see a man win money from his pards, and I believe he regards me as a villain."

"You no villee?"

"See here, Chinaman, I believe you are guying me—that you are not such a fool as you look," angrily exclaimed Trumps.

"Me foolee allee samee."

"You will be if you don't do as I tell you, for I know that you understand this country better than any one else at the camps, and you can go to another place and make money just as well as here."

"I will pay you big money to guide us to where we can catch Buffalo Bill upon his return."

"He havee gold?"

"Oh yes; he'll get it; he's just the man to get, where all others would fail, and the investment of a little lead will give us a fortune in gold, and the secret of what we do will go down into the grave with Buffalo Bill and those with him."

"Buffalo Billee shootee, too, maybe."

"Not if we get the drop on him, and you know the country well enough to guide us to it."

"No; Yellow Jack allee lightee; makee money here allee samee; no go killee man for gold. Yellow Jack allee lightee, Trumpee."

"Do you mean you refuse to be our guide?"

"Yellow Jack stay here, Trumpee."

"See here, Chinaman! I have come here and told you my secret, for I was sure you would go with us."

"I have put myself in your power; and more, I have been your best friend and paid you more money than any dozen men in the camp."

"You habee clothes cleane, washee washee allee samee for money."

"Oh yes; you did your work, but I have been your friend, and you have got to serve me now when I wish you to do so."

"Yellow Jack no go."

"We shall see as to that, for you do not scare a little bit."

"Others in the camp think you are allied to the Evil One, and by your jugglery, sleight-of-hand and other tricks you have deceived and frightened them, while there are men here who will swear they have seen you in two different places at the same time. You need not grin like a monkey, Chinese, for I know you are playing a bluff game with me, but I don't scare as others do."

"Trumpee no play bluff gamee."

"Not with you, for I am in deadly earnest. If you do what I demand, I have a fortune."

"To gettee?"

"See here, trying to guy me again, are you?"

"What guyee?"

"Are you a fool or a cunning devil?"

"Foolee," and the expression of utter vacancy on the face of the Chinaman seemed to carry out the response.

"Well, I'll not trifle any longer, and I have just this to say, that you have got to swear to me, by your heathen gods, that you will go with me when I come for you."

The Chinaman shook his head.

Then, with the quickness of a flash, there appeared a revolver in the hand of the gambler, and it was aimed full at the Chinaman, who started back toward a curtain that hung at the end of the long table.

"Hold! Hands up, and swear, or I'll send a bullet through that ugly head of yours."

"You shall not betray me, and if I kill you I'll tell the men I'll send for another Chinaman to do their work, that you struck for double pay and threatened me with your gun."

"Now do as I tell you, or I pull trigger, Chinaman, and Express your soul through to the Celestial Dormitory of the Chinese!" and the revolver muzzle covered Yellow Jack as he stood ten feet away, a look of peculiar cunning upon his really fine face.

CHAPTER XIV.

A TRICK OF THE HEATHEN CHINEE.

THE Chinaman did not move at the threat of the gambler—did not change the expression of his face.

That he must realize his danger there appeared to be no doubt.

He certainly held the secret of the sport,

regarding his intention to waylay Buffalo Bill upon his return and rob the coach.

That the sport had given himself away completely proved how sure he had been that the Chinese would gladly serve him, and was the very man to help him, in fact about the only one who knew the country.

Having put himself in the power of the Chinaman he would not leave himself at his mercy without some pledge that he would do as he demanded, and which would prevent him from betraying him.

To his utter amazement the gambler had discovered an honest Chinaman, or rather one who would not kill a man whom he appeared to dislike or rob him.

If indeed honest, he must not leave himself in his power, and only for the Chinaman's knowing the country as he did, and about where to head off the coach on its return, the sport would not have hesitated an instant to kill him then and there.

A death in the camps was too frequent an occurrence to cause much comment, and few would have any thing to say to Trumps if he reported having shot Yellow Jack in self-defense.

Many would really be glad to be thus rid of the man whom they dreaded as dealing in the "Black Art."

But holding the secret of the country as he did, the Chinaman was worth much to the gambler, who therefore would try hard to force him to terms and only as the last alternative kill him.

But Yellow Jack had not raised his hands, and stood outlined like a painting against the white curtain.

He kept his twinkling, cunning eyes upon the gambler, and said at last:

"Chinaman allee lightee; Trumpee foolee."

This was not flattering to the sport, and his face flushed angrily.

There stood the Chinaman under the muzzle of his revolver and not ten feet away, and dared tell him he was a fool.

"I tell you, heathen, if you don't talk quick and obey me, I'll let go my gun."

"Gun faller on floor, maybe killee 'Melican man."

"I'll let the bullet go, you fool, and you'll do the falling on the floor."

"Allee samee Chinaman won'tee," was the complacent answer.

Thoroughly incensed now, the gambler cried:

"I am a fool to talk to you."

"Quick! will you obey me, or shall I pull trigger?"

Down by the side of the gambler came falling a lot of odds and ends with a shelf; and startled, he turned his head to see what the matter was.

When he looked again, in that instant his eyes were off of him, the Chinaman had disappeared.

With a savage oath, the gambler sprung toward the curtain to tear it down and reveal the heathen, but he halted quickly as behind him came the words:

"Hands uppee! gun go offee quicke!"

Wheeling, he shrunk back, with a cry of almost terror, for there stood the Chinaman with a double-barreled shotgun to his shoulder.

The gun was cocked and the Chinaman's finger was upon the trigger.

"Don't shoot, Yellow Jack, for I am fairly caught; but you must be akin to Satan to get behind me as you did and cover me."

"Don't talkee! Hands uppee!"

"Chinaman talkee allee samee!"

"Why should I raise my hands?"

There was a movement of the finger upon the trigger.

Slight as it was the gambler saw it and his hands went up above his head, the right still grasping his revolver which he dared not use.

"'Melican man no foolee! Chinaman talkee now!"

"Well, say your say, for I don't like this."

"Maybe so. Yellow Jack no likee too, allee samee."

"Trumpee talkee, talkee, talkee, like Chinaman washee, washee, allee time; now Trumpee listen Chinaman chinee."

"How Trumpee likee?"

"Curse you, say your say, whatever it is!"

"Yellow Jack no fooler, lovee money, wantee money."

"He allee lightee guide Trumpee and his friends to holdee up Buffalo Billee."

"How much Trumpee pay?"

"Now you are talking sense, and—"

"Holdee hands uppee!" cried the Chinaman as the gambler started to lower his hands.

Up they went again with a muttered oath.

"Trumpee no curse. 'Melican man Joss no likee hear swaree."

"Curse you! Don't play missionary on me, but tell me what you want?"

"How muchee money for Yellow Jack?"

"If we get a big lot of boodle I'll give you a thousand dollars."

"How many men go?"

"Five."

"Chinaman six; want equal share."

"All right; I'll give it to you."

"Swear by 'Melican man Joss!"

"Yes."

"Allee lightee! Yellow Jack fixee."

"Trumpee Yellow Jack pardee now."

"Yes," and the gambler shook hands with the Chinaman but mentally determined that, when the gold was secured, there would be mourning in Chinaland over a dead Heathen he could account for.

CHAPTER XV.

FLANKING AN AMBUSH.

BUFFALO BILL was much impressed by the visit of the Chinaman.

He saw that he had misunderstood the Celestial, had believed him really his foe, though why he could not understand, saw that he had angered the man whose life he had saved because he would not allow him to show his gratitude by doing his laundry work for nothing.

Bill had discovered by sad experience how slight a thing will often turn one man against another, make the best of friends foes, and imaginary slights and insults break up friendship.

But such is human nature the world over, and if the Chinaman wished to hate him because he could not pay him for saving his life, why he willingly allowed him to have his way.

But now a different phase was put upon the Chinaman's actions toward him.

He had been playing a part to be in secret his friend.

This his coming to warn him of danger had proven, and during their supper in the lone camp, the two had had a long talk.

The Chinaman knew that though a popular idol with many, Buffalo Bill had a number of secret foes.

The very honesty of the gallant Pony Rider, his manliness, courage and noble nature made men of a different style hate him.

Now, where their feelings against him might have continued to be smothered under ordinary circumstances, his going on this lone and desperate trail as the driver of the rescue coach, had made some of them determined to act.

That he was going to save gold, as well as human life, was the great temptation that led them to plot against him, and so Buffalo Bill, before he had been three days upon his adventurous trail, had discovered what men would do for money.

Desperate Dave he had not expected better of, but the two hunters of the station, whom he had sent back on foot, he had not looked for as foes and robbers.

Now the Chinaman came to him, warning him against five others.

He knew them all—that is, by the odd names they bore upon the border.

He had supposed the stock-tenders to be his friends, but love of gold had made them his foes.

They were a hard lot, he very well knew, and men it would do to keep a watch upon.

Now that they were upon the trail against him, and with the odds of five to one, it would not do for him to be merciful, if it came to a fight.

But, the best thing would be, knowing their place of ambush, to flank them, and Yellow Jack had told him just how it could be done, had drawn a rough map of a trail that would take him around Indian Springs.

The night in camp passed without disturb-

ance or adventure, and at dawn Buffalo Bill was up and at work.

An hour after he had breakfast, his horses were soon harnessed, the two extra animals, no longer allowed to run loose, were lariatied to the rear of the coach, and once more he had started upon his trail.

That was the night that he would have reached Indian Springs to camp, and he made up his mind, as he drove along, that he would push ahead at a steady pace, flank the place by following Yellow Jack's trail, and leaving his coach and cattle in camp go on foot and see just who was there in ambush.

Approaching Indian Springs from the opposite direction, and on foot, he felt sure that he could see his foes, count them, and escape unseen.

He would risk this much to satisfy his mind, and at the same time he thought the opportunity might offer to find their horses unguarded and run them off, which would be a clever piece of work upon his part.

So he drove, pushing his team a little, his eye far ahead to pick out the best trail, and his reins well in hand to draw up at any moment danger threatened.

At last, he came to where a number of canyons diverged like the fingers from the hand.

The map he had with instructions simply said:

"Take third canyon counting from the right."

In one way and another they all led by trails more or less devious through a lofty range of hills.

The instruction of Yellow Jack, the Chinese, had been to take the right-hand canyon, and this would bring him out some distance from Indian Springs, the place of threatened danger from ambush.

It was a longer way, but the safe one, as it avoided the spot where his foes would be in waiting for him.

He did as the Chinese had advised, and a couple of hours before sunset found a pleasant place for camping, as his adviser had said he would.

Quickly he went into camp, had his supper, and then set out to cross the trail that the written directions of Langdon the miner would have led him.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE DISCOVERY.

FROM what he had learned from the Celestial, Buffalo Bill felt that he was not three miles from the camp of his foes at Indian Springs.

But not caring to be caught at a disadvantage, if discovered by them, he saddled one of the extra horses and rode away from his camp, following the directions given him, to find the Indian Springs, by the Chinaman.

He recognized a cliff, as described to him, and dismounting from his horse, began to approach on foot and with the greatest caution.

Nearer and nearer he drew, the Chinaman's directions coming out just as he said they would, and there being good shelter for him in his approach, in the way of timber, thickets and rocks.

At last he ascended a ridge which looked over into a small valley.

There he beheld five horses staked out.

They were unsaddled and feeding at the end of long stake-ropes.

Their saddles and bridles were on the ground beneath a large tree near, where there could be seen the ashes of a camp fire, with a few cooking utensils and blankets about it.

He had found the camping-place of the men who were on his trail, and they must be not far distant!

They had evidently ridden hard and had arrived at the place the night before from the appearance of their camp.

Buffalo Bill had a field-glass with him, and he quickly took in the surroundings and the camp.

The cliff, which the Chinaman had told him was over the Springs, was a quarter of a mile distant, and a small canyon led toward it from the valley.

Making certain that no one was in the camp, Buffalo Bill descended the ridge to it, to find no one there.

The sun was yet nearly an hour high, and he at once decided upon his plan of action.

He would leave the men dismounted, but not touch their provisions or camp equipage to cause them too much suffering on their return to the camps, and which they must make on foot.

So he saddled and bridled the horses, and mounting one of the animals led the others back over the ridge.

He halted them there, not very far from where he had left his own horse, and hitching them to trees, so that they could be unfastened hurriedly, he returned to the top of the ridge and again looked down upon the camp.

All was quiet there. The men had not returned to discover the loss of their animals.

The shadows were deepening in the valley, so he hurried on, and was soon going through the canyon leading to Indian Springs.

He found the approach all in his favor, coming from that side.

There were innumerable hiding-places.

Gliding from one to the other, he at last gained a good position, a few boulders covered with rocks, not two hundred yards from the cliff before spoken of.

Reaching a point of observation he peered over, and what he beheld interested him.

He looked down upon a small basin—in fact, a very pretty valley a dozen acres in size.

It sloped gently up toward the cliff, which jutted out from a bold and rugged range of hills.

Along the base of the ridge was a fringe of trees, and dotting the valley here and there were others.

The valley slanted down to another ridge, along which ran a stream clear and swift, the banks also fringed with trees.

To the right of the cliff was a pass, or canyon, leading through the range, and through this led the trail by which he would have come, had he followed the directions sent by Leonard Langdon the miner to his brother the Division Agent.

But, the Chinaman's directions had enabled him to flank the Springs and approaching by another direction avoid thus the trap set for him.

Under the cliff he saw where the Springs came forth, forming a stream of water that ran turbulently down across the valley to the other side.

But taking in the whole situation quietly, there was one thing that interested Buffalo Bill more than all else—which was the forms of four men seated near the Springs, and apparently waiting patiently for something to turn up.

What they expected to turn up was himself, for had he kept on by that trail he would have been due at the Springs about that time!

And, as he looked, he discerned a fifth man, one coming out of the pass at a run and waving to his comrades.

All sprung to their feet, and, as the other ran up, Buffalo Bill distinctly heard the words:

"Be ready, pards! The coach is not coming, but somebody is!"

"Who can it be?" muttered Buffalo Bill, as he took up a better position and brought his rifle around for use.

CHAPTER XVII.

A MYSTERIOUS RESCUER.

"Now who can it be that is coming?" muttered Buffalo Bill, as he settled down into a better position to see, and to chip in with his aid if necessary.

"It may be another party from the camp on my trail. If so, I don't help a little bit. Let it be a case of dog eat dog!"

"Now it seems strange, when Chief Langdon offered such large inducements to go after his brother, not a soul volunteered, and yet, now that I have started upon the trail, a number of them see the chance to kill me, send one of their number on with the coach to play rescuer, while they follow to do more killing and get the treasure."

"Desperate Dave did have the nerve to come alone; next were the two camp-hunters; but now there are five in this band, and the Lord only knows what the fourth outfit consists of."

"Well, I am in luck, and can afford to look on and bide my time."

So saying, Buffalo Bill closely watched the men in the timber.

They had quickly taken cover, and something had excited them—the coming, perhaps, of some one else than the one they were in ambush for.

They evidently expected whoever it was would come directly to the Springs and camp for the night, for, as he noticed, they had taken up positions with that view.

Suddenly, as Bill looked, there approached a horseman coming into the valley from the pass.

The sun was but a short distance above the horizon, but its rays were falling in the valley, lighting all up with a golden hue.

They fell upon the horseman, who had come to a halt, and he was revealed distinctly.

He had halted to reconnoiter, for his gaze was upon the surroundings of the Springs; but all was quiet there.

He detected not the lurking foe, and, after a moment's halt, rode slowly toward the Springs.

In the moment of hesitation at the mouth of the pass, Buffalo Bill had been able to see him distinctly.

So had the five men in ambush.

They beheld a man of about forty years of age, dressed in buckskin, even to moccasins, and wearing a black slouch hat with the broad brim looped up in front.

He wore a beard, had dark eyes, was over six feet in height, and his black hair was long and wavy.

"It is California Joe!" cried Buffalo Bill.*

He was mounted upon a large-bodied, gaunt, but good horse, and carried with him his entire outfit for camping, hunting and subsistence.

He was well armed, a breech-loading rifle hanging from his saddle-horn, while another was carried slung at his back, and in his belt were a couple of revolvers and a long bowie, while a third pistol was in a holster on his saddle.

A lariat, stake-rope, bag of camp utensils, roll of blankets and haversack of provisions gave his horse a good load to carry, but then California Joe walked a great deal when on a long trail.

He was known along the Overland as a man of indomitable pluck, a mountain wanderer, and one who knew the country as no one else did.

"Yes, California Joe, and going toward the Big Horn Basin!"

"Now he is going to camp and those men will kill him, for they want no witness of their being here, and will end him to be ready for me—ah!"

As Buffalo Bill spoke a puff of smoke burst out from behind a rock near the Springs, and California Joe's horse dropped dead, pinioning his rider beneath him in his fall, so sudden and wholly unexpected was his going down.

At the same instant several other shots came from the thicket, and the five men sprung from ambush and rushed toward the fallen man.

But, just then, a ringing report came from the ridge and the leader of the five intended assassins dropped dead.

The others halted in utter amazement, and gazed wildly about them in wonder and dread.

As they thus stood another shot was heard.

But it did not come from the ridge!

It came from a thicket on the summit of the cliff.

A second man dropped dead!

And this shot amazed Buffalo Bill as much as it did those upon whom it had been fired.

Who had fired it?

That the three men did not wait to find out, for by two unseen dead-shots had they

been fired upon—one on the ridge, one on the cliff, and their intended victim was freeing himself to also fight for his life.

In dismay they fled down toward the pass.

But, as they bounded away, a second shot rung out from the unknown marksman up on the cliff, and a third man fell as he fled toward safety.

The other two increasing their speed at this third death shot, ran like deer, to soon disappear in the growing shadows of the pass, just as California Joe freed himself from his slain horse, and rose, rifle in hand, to face his foes.

But, they had disappeared, and he saw the tall form of Buffalo Bill coming down the slope from the ridge.

"Ho, Buffalo Bill! God bless you, my boy! You saved my scalp that time, you and your pard. Who is he?"

"I don't know. The two shots came from the cliff. Hol pard! show yourself," shouted Buffalo Bill.

And California Joe also hailed; but, no answer came; no one was to be seen.

The unknown guardian of a life remained invisible!

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE RETURN.

AFFAIRS at the camps were not as quiet as Luke Langdon could have wished, after Buffalo Bill's departure, and the weeks were passing away.

Luke was a fine fellow, one who had been well born, reared in refinement, well educated, and left a fortune to share with his brother Leonard.

He not only had shared it, but had done far more, for when his brother had lost his portion, by a life of extravagance, he had taken him into partnership with him on equal terms.

But the brother still held to his reckless ways, and Luke found himself swamped, in less than two years, by his brother's debts.

It was the more bitter to him, as he had expected to be married within another year to a young and lovely girl who was also an heiress; but his pride would not allow him to ask her to wed a poor man, and so he wrote her, breaking the engagement, telling her frankly why, and leaving her to marry another if so she wished.

But he did say that he was going off to seek another fortune by his own exertions, and if she was free when he returned with success, she would still find him, as ever, her lover.

Ill-fortune, however, dogged his steps, and after three years he found himself only a division agent upon the Overland.

Here, in various ways, he was able to make money.

His pay was good and he invested it in pelts he bought from trappers and friendly redskins, sending them East and receiving good prices, he traded in horses, opened an eating-house for passengers on the Overland, and in every way he honorably could, sought to better his fortunes.

At length came the mysterious letter from his brother, tacked upon his cabin door.

It was a confession of his errors, a frank acknowledgment of the wrong he had done him, a pleading for forgiveness, and making known that he had joined a band of thirty adventurous gold-seekers, and boldly invaded the Big Horn Basin.

They had gone well equipped, mounted, armed, and with stores to last a year or more, and by placer-mining had been successful beyond their expectations.

They had had foes in another band of whites, few in number, who had secretly fought them for invading the Big Horn Basin, until, at last, these foes had driven them into a corner and a desperate battle had been fought, at the end of which not one of their enemies remained alive.

Notwithstanding this, their gold they could never find, and in the battle one-third of their own band had fallen.

Indians, also, had proven to be their foes; and sickness and accidents had removed others, until but three of the original number remained, and these three had but scant provisions, not a horse left, and were too weak to reach a place of safety.

From one of his comrades he had heard of him, his brother, for he knew it could be none other, from the name and description, being division agent on the Overland, and so it was that he wrote him.

Gold he had enough to make them both rich, and he would share equally with him of the amount that would be his.

If either, or both or his comrades died, their share also would be his, for that had been the compact of the gold-hunters.

If he, Leonard Langdon, should die before success came, his snare was to go entire to his brother, Luke, who was to send them aid; that that was agreed upon by the comrades in distress.

Such had been the letter that Luke Langdon had read to Buffalo Bill, the daring volunteer to go to the rescue upon the terms the three miners demanded.

Thus it was that Luke Langdon lived in hope that his brother would be rescued by Buffalo Bill, not so much for the gold, but treasure he still loved devotedly, and it had been a cause of deep sorrow to him not to know before what had become of him.

Now there was hope of their being united again, and once more enjoying the luxuries of riches, and quick would Luke fly Eastward to see if his lady-love still remained true to him.

But, Luke had realized that Desperate Dave had left the camps, after the departure of Buffalo Bill.

The two hunters of the camps had also been missing for several days, and came back on foot and half starved, saying that Indians had captured their horses.

Thus five more men had disappeared, and a worse quintette could not have been found.

After an absence of ten days two of the five came back dismounted, half starved and with a terrible story of their three comrades having been killed, and their narrow escape from Indians.

The two who returned were Wild Tom and Rip Raps, who explained that the Indians had attacked them while herding their horses and cattle.

After their return another band suddenly disappeared from the camps, who announced that they were going prospecting for gold, and, to the surprise of all, Trumps the gambler was the leader of this band, of four beside himself.

The departure of this last party caused Luke Langdon more anxiety than he cared to admit even to himself, for a gold prospecting tour might mean a hold-up of the coach of Buffalo Bill on its return, though it was true it was not yet expected back for several weeks.

Trumps and his party disappeared, and a week or more passed. Luke Langdon was growing more and more anxious when, one day, a wild shout arose about the Overland headquarters, and at a swift pace the rescue coach was seen approaching!

Upon the box sat Buffalo Bill, who held the reins over six horses!

Drawing quickly to a halt, Buffalo Bill called out, as he stood up and pointed to a body lying on top of the coach.

"I am back, Captain Langdon, and there lies a man you may know, while there are more in like condition inside the coach."

CHAPTER XIX.

YELLOW JACK'S RUSE.

It will be well, after having told of Buffalo Bill's return to the Overland Trail station with the coach, before telling of the adventures that befell him before doing so, to say something regarding the departure of Dare Golden the gambler, better known as "Trumps the Sport," and his departure with four comrades, as they stated, on a gold prospecting expedition, but which the reader has doubtless already surmised was a hunt for the gold which Buffalo Bill had been sent to bring in, with the miners who had secured it.

It will be remembered that, after the nearly fatal scene between Trumps and the Chinaman, in the cabin of the latter, a peace had been patched up between them, and a compact entered into by which the Chinese who knew the country so well, would serve as guide to the dashing border sport and his party for a certain consideration.

This being arranged Trumps had left to the Chinaman the arrangements, of the time

*California Joe was a mystery of the Plains. His name is said to have been Joseph Mimer, but no one knows, though Buffalo Bill gives that as his real name. He was a Kentuckian, it was asserted, though of this no one was certain. California Joe rendered the Government most valuable service as scout and guide, did much to aid the pioneers of the far West passed his days off duty in gold hunting, trapping and wandering about the wilds of the frontier. He met his death Dec. 5th, '76, at the hands of a cowardly assassin, while seated in front of his cabin at Red Cloud, Dakota. Who was the assassin was never known.—THE AUTHOR.

to start and all else in the way of provisions and equipments.

He did not have any suspicion of the Chinese, and so when the latter came to him one day and told him to make their going known, he did so.

"Talkee talkee heapee much 'bout go find goldee.

"Tellee pards allee samee, and tellee how Yellow Jack he go allee lightee puttee 'Melican man on trail."

So Yellow Jack had said, and all felt assured that the Chinaman had discovered some signs of gold, when among the Indians, and had told Trumps, who had arranged to go with him.

Many a man at the station wanted also to go along, and being refused, felt sorry that Yellow Jack had not taken them into his confidence.

If the Chinese would leave such a good thing as he had at the station, and Trumps would give up his gambling, and comfortable cabin, in camp, all felt sure that there must be a big thing in the gold hunt and regretted they were not in it.

But, one day, several days before the one appointed for their departure, Yellow Jack was taken violently ill.

Many thought that he had been poisoned, and it was thought he must die.

Trumps was terribly scared, and tried to be a devoted nurse, but this the Chinaman would not allow.

At last he told Trumps that he would tell him just where to go, and how to go—that he thought he was going to die and the party must start without him, as they should not delay for him to get better, even if he did recover.

He had the Sport writing down directions, drawing maps, and had hardly finished the work when he went off in a terrible spasm, and turned to the hue of death.

But, Trumps smiled grimly, for he felt that he had the secret of just how to head off Buffalo Bill on his return, and capture the gold which the gambler felt certain he would secure.

He did not care whether the Chinaman died or not—in fact, wished that he would die, for the terrible scare he had given him that day, weeks before.

So it was that Trumps bade the Chinaman a pretended sad farewell, and with his map and directions folded in an inside pocket, set out with his four followers on the trail of Buffalo Bill and the gold coach.

The men at the camps waved them a farewell, and the "gold-hunters" rode off well supplied with provisions, camp equipage, arms and ammunition all on a couple of pack-horses.

And lying in his bed in his cabin, looking out of the little window close by his head, Yellow Jack saw them depart.

But—presto change! The terribly ill look vanished from his face, an expression of deep cunning crept back into his eyes, and he laughed a little "He! he! he!" that meant more than speech could reveal.

The Celestial was, almost in a moment, himself again; the artful, conniving, treacherous heathen to his enemy—the devoted, loyal, true-as-steel friend of the man he loved—Buffalo Bill!

When at last Trumps and his comrades disappeared in the distance, the laundryman said, aloud:

"Sportee thinkee Chinaman big foollee;—Chinaman know sportee much one!

"Yellow Jack sickee? Not mucheel!" and he chuckled like the suppressed croak of a crow.

"Sportee get sickee before him get backee!"—and again that comical croak.

At that moment the rejuvenated "John's" grotesque humor suddenly subsided, for his quick hearing detected a step sound outside. Instantly the distorted face was resumed, like a mask, as though suffering the agonies of death, and he groaned and writhed as the door opened and in walked Luke Langdon.

"My poor fellow, I am sorry to see you suffering as you do, and wish I could in some way relieve you," said the division chief, in a tone of deepest sympathy.

To his utter amazement the look of suffering left the Chinaman's face and the words came:

"Yellow Jackee allee lightee, now sportee gone. Sportee, him debil, you betee, chief!"

CHAPTER XX.

LUKE LANGDON SURPRISED.

LUKE LANGDON looked dumfounded at this miraculous change in the Chinese.

He had gone to see him several times before, had tried to relieve what appeared to be his mortal agony.

Already had been discovered the great loss the Chinaman would be to the camps, for he had made himself invaluable as laundryman, as doctor, nurse and cook, when little things were needed for the sick.

He was feared, it was true, by many, as a heathen necromancer, or evil conjurer while he was known to be one of the few Chinamen who would not stand abuse from bullies or imposition from any one.

Altogether his loss to the camps would be great, and Mr. Langdon had gone to see him to see what he could do to help him.

This sudden transformation from agony to ease surprised the caller beyond measure, and he said:

"Why, Jack, are you not sick, after all?"

"Not mucheel!" and then the croak.

"You are really not a sick man?"

"No sickee tall! me belly much well!"

"You astonish me. Have you not been ill—very ill?"

"Playee 'possum, chief! no sickee, t'all!"

"You have been playing 'possum?"

"Allee samee."

"But why?"

"No wantee go with Sportee."

"Ah! you did not wish to go?"

"Not mucheel! Sportee much bad!"

"He said you were going as guide, for you knew the country so well."

"Know country allee lightee; no go as guidee. Stay here. Trumpee go 'lone. Hab debbil of timee allee samee! Ha-ha-ha!"

and his smile was comically diabolical.

"You are a great actor, Jack, for your face appeared to be distorted with intense pain, your complexion became livid and you seemed about to die."

The Chinaman at once drew up his features and, for a moment, simulated agony with startling reality, while his face took on the hue of death.

"Allee samee like that?"

"Yes," and Langdon was forced to laugh.

Then he said:

"You had some motive in deceiving Trumps and his companions. What was it?"

"No likee."

"I thought that you and Trumps were great friends."

"Trumps bad 'Melican man—Jack goodee Chinaman."

"Ah! he has cheated you in some way?"

"No cheatee—no 'Melican man cheatee Chinaman. Chinaman look foollee—foollee not mucheel."

Langdon again laughed and replied:

"I believe you are right."

"But what are you going to do now?"

"Washee washee."

"I know; but, should Trumps return he would find you had deceived him, and there would be trouble, sure."

A strange look crossed the face of the Chinaman, and Luke Langdon read it aright.

There was not a shadow of fear in it. He simply revealed that he would accept the alternative of any trouble with the gambler.

But he said seriously:

"No wantee trouble. If Sportee make trouble, Chinaman allee lightee; no scare—no 'fraid!"

"Sportee much bad man."

"I am pretty sure of that; but I think you had better still let the men think you are ill."

A cunning expression gleamed in the eyes of Yellow Jack, and he answered:

"Me sickee three days—gettee well then."

"You Jack's friend; no tellee not sickee?"

"No, indeed, Jack! You can bet on that!"

"Chinaman your friend. Likee 'Melican man Langdon allee samee brother."

"I appreciate your good will, Jack, and we will be friends," and Langdon held out his hand.

The Chinaman took it, gave it a firm clasp, and said:

"Don't tellee, keep tongue stillee!"

"Jack know: Sportee gone for Buffalo Billee!"

"Ha! it is as I feared, then!"

"I will at once pursue him and—"

"No! Trumpee allee samee do nothing; took trail that go wrong way! Buffalo Billee allee lightee; killee Sport!"

"Ah! but can this be arranged?"

"Allee lightee."

"You are very sure?"

"Jack no lie."

"But, may not they catch Cody unawares?"

"Buffalo Billee allee lightee."

"Jack no tellee how, but he no be killee."

"He come to campee allee lightee when time."

"Well, Jack, I have confidence in you and so I will rest content."

"I am snre if Cody, and those whom I hope he is to bring back with him, were in any danger from Gambler Golden and his gang you would tell me; in fact you would not have told me of their purpose."

"I am aware that you and Buffalo Bill, for some reason, did not seem the best of friends, but I know that he twice saved your life, and I do not believe you would see harm befall him, so I leave all to you."

"I will visit you until you get out again, to avoid suspicion, and then I hope you will tell me more," and Luke Langdon left the Chinaman's cabin muttering to himself:

"A strange creature that Chinaman, but, somehow, I believe he is true as steel, and feel sure that he has planned to circumvent the scoundrels who are on Buffalo Bill's trail."

CHAPTER XXI.

CALIFORNIA JOE'S DUMB PARD.

LONG and earnestly did Buffalo Bill and California Joe gaze toward the cliff, from whence two fatal shots had been fired upon the party in ambush, but to no purpose; no one was there that they could discover.

Why did he not show himself? and, who could it be? was the question Buffalo Bill asked himself, over and over again.

"I guess he's took a sneak around ter come down an' j'ine us, Bill," inferred California Joe, who always affected the border dialect, though it was well known that he could use the best of language when he wished.

"Yes, I suppose that is it, and instead of standing here guessing we had better get to work, Joe."

"So I says. When we is camped I has got some guessin' ter do," was the answer.

"First, there are three dead bodies to look after, you know."

"Yes; ther dead can't bury themselves, and I has nothin' ag'in' a dead body, Pard Bill."

"No; the most evil man in life is sacred in death."

"So sings I, every time."

"Now we kin arrange to camp jist here, can't we?"

"Whose with yer? Ain't alone I take it?"

"Yes; playing a lone hand on this run."

"What doing?"

"That I will tell when we are in camp, but the day won't last us much longer."

"Right you are; but, William, why not camp here?"

"I have a camp already three miles from here, and if you will get those bodies together and meet the unknown shooter when he comes down from the cliff, I will go after the horses of those men."

"You know what they is?"

"Yes, I found them in their camp, so saddled up and have them waiting not very far away."

"More men?"

"No."

"None dead?"

"No; there were but five; they were here in ambush."

"Layin' fer me?"

"No, Joe; they were lying in wait for me."

"Oho! you has somethin' ter tell, Bill; but I kin wait; it 'll tell itself, I guesses."

Buffalo Bill hastened away over the ridge to get the horses of the road assassins. He knew that those of the gang who had fled could not flank around for hours to where he had left them, and was aware, also, that as their faces were turned homeward in flight they would doubtless keep on, though they had no food and were on foot.

Of course there was a probability that they might lie in hiding during the night and seek their camp on the following day, hoping it had not been discovered. Should they do that, Buffalo Bill determined they should find their camping outfit there, provisions and all, for he believed that they must suffer greatly without food and bedding, as it would be several days before they could reach the camps.

His was a far from cruel nature, even to a foe; Cody code is the Golden Rule.

After a rapid walk he came to the horses, just as he had left them, and mounting one he rode rapidly back to Indian Springs.

It was twilight, and growing darker each moment, but there stood California Joe, and at his feet lay the men who had been so suddenly cut off in life.

But, no one else was there!

The mysterious rescuer, who had fired from the cliff, had not appeared.

"Back ag'in, Bill, and with the critters?"

"Yes; but, where is the man from the cliff?"

"Hain't seen him, and he didn't answer when I called."

"That is strange, for he must have had time to have worked his way around here?"

"Oh yes; I've been up thar more than once, and the way round hain't fur."

"Then he would have to come through the pass?"

"Yes."

"He may have run upon those two escaping men."

"Yas, he might; but I has a sneakin' idee he c'u'd take care o' hisself if he was ter bump ag'in 'em."

"No doubt of that; still he might not have seen them before they got the drop on him."

"You have your traps ready, I see?"

"Yas, I stripped ole Rough and Ready, of saddle, bridle and all; and, William, you may think I is a child, but I tell you I cried like a whipped schoolboy over my ole hoss, God bless him!"

"We has been together on many a trail; I has had him for six long years, and a man would git to lovin' his wife in that length o' time, if they was tergether time in and time out."

"Rough and Ready wasn't much of a beauty, but he was on hand when I called on him, and he has saved my life a hundred times, that's dead-level so."

"He were good as a watch-dog, good as a horse, and first class as a friend."

"We has slept many a night under ther same blanket, and in ther desert I has shared my grub and canteen with him when thar was no water and grass, and I'll tell you as a fact when I has had nothin' to eat and he had plenty o' grass, I has seen him stand and look sorry, and when he did snatch a mouthful he looked ashamed of himself like."

"Bill, I loved that horse, and no coyote's tooth shall touch his hide, if it takes me a week ter dig a grave for him."

California Joe's voice was broken with emotion all through his eulogy of his all-faithful if dumb comrade for years who had shared with the venturesome man hardships and dangers untold.

CHAPTER XXII.

NO CLUE.

BUFFALO BILL was touched by California Joe's tribute of affection to his horse, and would not interrupt him.

He saw him brush the tears from his eyes, and the wilderness ranger said:

"I'm all right now, Bill. What's ter be done?"

"Let us strap these bodies on the horses, as soon as you have selected the one you want, for I see that they are all good ones."

"Yes, they is, for a fact. I'll take kindly to this one," and Joe picked out the best of the lot—a large, gaunt, clean-limbed roan.

"You've got an eye for first-class horse-flesh, Joe."

"Maybe you wanted him, Bill. If so he is—"

"No! no! I've got more good ones now than I care for. Take him. We'll strap the bodies upon the others and ride them to camp, where I have picks and spades to bury them with."

"All right; but did I tell yer one of ther men wasn't dead when I got to him?"

"No! Was that so?"

"Yas; he said his name was Bony Bob, and he looked it, for a thinner man not in a grave I never see."

"He told me he know'd he war on ther Death-trail; that he had been wicked all his life, and was jist that bony he wished he c'u'd go all over life ag'in, and he'd be different."

"That's what I has heerd many a one say when death has his grip on them."

"Like men I has see hanged; they all repents then, sees angils laying in ambush for 'em ter take 'em up to Glory's camp and all sich nonsense, when they pretends ter git ther same roost up yonder as a man who has been squar' all his life, and sets a premium upon bein' bad, by doin' as yer pleases and then hopin' ter git a chance ter say yer is sorry when yer is dyin'."

"I tole him I guessed as how he was sorry, but I didn't say as how ther angils war layin' fer him; I guessed ther one layin' fer him had horns and cloven hoofs, fer I didn't want him ter feel any badder than he did."

"Then he said as how they had come out ter kill you and git ther coach, and run ther game ther'selves, whatever it are."

"Afore I c'u'd git him ter say more he give a shout, sprung to his feet and cried out:

"Save me from 'em! Don't let 'em take me thar!"

"I guess he seen ther angils with horns I spok of; and with that he fell dead at my feet, Bill. So I guesses you'll have to tell me what he c'u'dn't, pard."

"I will, Joe."

"Now as ter my dear old horse. I'll jist camp here by him, fer coyotes will come sneakin' round later."

"We will build log fires on each side of him and that will scare them off."

"Then we will go to my camp, bury the bodies, and return to-morrow and put Rough and Ready under ground."

"All right; what you say goes," was the answer.

The bodies were soon strapped to the backs of the horses; then the two friends gathered wood and two large fires were built, one on each side of California Joe's horse.

That done, Cody and his strange pard rode away in the darkness.

Buffalo Bill led the way up the slope, over the ridge and on to where he had left his own horse, which he led away with them.

Arriving at his camp, he found all there as he had left it; so a fire was soon built and supper cooked, after which the two pards set to work to build graves for the three dead men, talking the while, still wondering who had fired those two shots from the cliff and where he could be.

California Joe was certainly much surprised at finding there such of an outfit as Buffalo Bill had with him, and was all curiosity to know the why and wherefore of it all, though he did not ask.

The grave was dug; the three bodies, each wrapped in a blanket, were placed side by side in the pit and the dirt thrown carefully in, California Joe saying sadly:

"To-morrer I has ter do as much fer poor ole Rough-and-Ready."

Then the two pards turned in for the night, which passed without disturbed sleep, and both arose at daybreak much refreshed.

After breakfast, the team was hitched to the coach, the weapons of the dead robbers were put with the others in the stage, and the led horses, now increased to six, California Joe riding the roan, were fastened on behind.

The way was taken to Indian Springs, but a halt was made near the camp where Buffalo Bill had discovered the horses, and it was found that the two fugitives had been there during the night, secured their camp outfit and departed again, doubtless on their way back to the station or some other point on the Overland.

Arriving at Indian Springs, the fires were still burning, so that the two escaping outlaws must have believed that the camp of their foes was there, and therefore had given it a wide berth. Finding their outfit just where they had left it, but their horses gone, they could not understand that Buffalo

Bill, in the kindness of his heart, had left the provisions and bedding for their use.

There was no sign at Indian Springs of the man who had fired from the cliff and saved California Joe's life. He had left no clue as to his identity or whither he had gone—no mark, no sign, to give the two friends the least explanation of his presence there at that opportune moment.

CHAPTER XXIII.

LEFT AFOOT.

BUFFALO BILL had never known California Joe well, before meeting him as he then had, under such peculiar circumstances.

He was aware that the strangest stories were going the rounds of all the camps about the wilderness tramp, of whom no one knew save that he was called California Joe.

His life had been a most thrilling and adventurous one; he was a wild West wanderer, afraid of nothing, living alone, though not shunning company—a man who had made a record as an Indian-fighter, who was as cunning and tenacious as a redskin, a perfect trailer, and knew the country as no other white man did.

His remarkable escapes and wonderful deeds were the talk of the camps; he was constantly on the go, trapping and hunting he claimed, but it was generally believed that he was gold seeking.

A dangerous man to arouse he certainly was, but he never sought trouble, and if it was forced upon him, those who were the instigators had cause to regret having made California Joe their foe.

Buffalo Bill always had admired him, and when Joe had put in an appearance where the Pony Rider and scout happened to be, they had always been most friendly and as "chummy" as real pards.

Now Buffalo Bill had come across his erratic friend, where he had expected to find no man who was not his foe, and the meeting had placed Joe under obligations to him for saving his life.

But, the other life-saver who had "chipped in" so well in the very nick of time—who was he?

That was what worried both men more and more as they thought the matter over, and each one made a secret vow to solve that mystery just as soon as possible.

A spot was selected for the grave of Rough and Ready right where there was a natural monument in the shape of a huge boulder, and with pick and shovel Buffalo Bill and California Joe set to work to dig it.

They dug deep, and the faithful dumb comrade of the old plainsman was dragged there, by the united strength of the two men, a bed of leaves was placed in the bottom by Joe, and the horse was lowered gently, not tumbled down into the sepulcher, Buffalo Bill yielding to the wishes of his companion without a word.

A blanket was then spread over the dead beast and the two men shoveled in the dirt and piled up the mound completely, as for a human being.

Logs were brought there and placed on each side, and large rocks were put on top, to prevent the coyotes from digging into the grave.

"Pard Cody, I thank you from my heart. Some day I may have ter do as much fer you, or you fer me."

"Now, what's next? I reckon it is gettin' dinner time. So my watch says."

"Your watch, Joe?"

"Yes; I carries one right here as keeps perfect time," and he put his hand upon his stomach.

"Well, we'll have dinner and then we'll take a little tramp."

"Where to, Pard Bill?"

"I am so anxious to find out who it was upon the cliff yesterday and what became of him that I cannot rest until both you and I have gone over the ground and tried to strike his trail."

"Count me in on that same, William. I'm jist keen to ascertain who's the man we owes so much to."

So dinner was had, and the happily met comrades went away through the pass, leaving their camps wholly unguarded.

They saw no tracks of horses, and Joe led the way, which he knew, to the top of the cliff.

It was not a long trail, and showed that the mysterious shot, knowing the way, could have readily reached the valley where they were, in a half-hour, after firing the two saving shots, as he did.

The trail was very rugged, as they approached the cliff, but they continued on more slowly the rest of the distance, Buffalo Bill looking most attentively all about him, for he really had fears that the unknown had been killed by the two men who had fled in the very moment of their supposed triumph.

"Thar's ther cliff whar ther big pine is, Buf'ler," explained Joe, and in five minutes more they came to the escarpment, from where the two shots had been fired.

Not the trace of a trail was there—nothing to show that any one had been in hiding among the scrub pines which fringed the edge of the cliff or bluff.

But, California Joe, who was searching the ground with keen scrutiny, was positively startled by a shout from Buffalo Bill, followed by the words:

"My God!

"They have got us foul, Joe! See them!"

What California Joe saw was enough to make him turn pale, for, away from the Springs, going at full speed, was the coach, a man on the top, while another followed, mounted upon Buffalo Bill's horse and leading every other horse in the outfit!

The pards were left alone and on foot in the wilderness!

Outwitted, circumvented, distanced in the game of strategy and defiance, the two wilderness runners were, for the moment, speechless with chagrin, and incensed at their own want of precaution in leaving their camp unguarded.

A "tenderfoot" could not have done worse!

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE OUTWITTED PARDS.

NEITHER Buffalo Bill nor California Joe were never wholly down or disconcerted at any danger or emergency.

What with nerves of steel and courage that never quailed, they yet were ever alive to peril or hazard; and so now, to find themselves left afoot there on the cliff overlooking the valley, and to behold their two foes driving away with the whole outfit was to arouse in them equally the desire for revenge and mortification at their almost helpless predicament.

Their two enemies, who had escaped the night before, they could but assume, had quickly gone back toward the Overland station from whence they had come, or to some other inhabited point.

They knew that they had slipped back through the pass, avoiding the fires, built to keep the coyotes away from California Joe's horse, and, regarding their camp, had found their horses gone, but their prisoners remaining.

It was natural to suppose, therefore, that they had at once returned through the pass to make their escape; but, instead of that, the two beleaguered men now decided that the scoundrels had remained hidden in the valley, had seen the two friends camp about the Indian Springs, bury the horse, have their dinner and then set out together, doubtless on a search for their enemies yet in hiding.

Then had come their enemies' moment of triumph.

They would see how far their foes were going, and if far enough, they would make an attempt to capture the outfit.

Quickly had they gathered up all the horses, tied them together with lariats, harnessed up the two coach teams, gathered the camp equipage, and were ready for flight.

Perfectly well aware that they were outwitting two of the most famous plainsmen in the West, Buffalo Bill and California Joe, they apparently had been determined to make a clean sweep in order to shame and madden their redoubtable foe.

So the two comrades reasoned.

And more: could they escape with the

coach and every one of the horses, they were leaving the two plainsmen almost utterly helpless, without food, with no blankets, only their weapons to save them from starvation.

They would leave them so far from the camps as to make their tramp back a matter of days, and thus make pursuit practically impossible.

If they attempted to pursue, after reaching the camp, they would be at least a week behind them, and that meant a great deal.

With all the led horses to draw upon, they could, of course, push on rapidly to the Big Horn Basin.

Both of the renegades were good plainsmen, and could readily find their way, even if they found no map and directions, as they hoped to do, among Buffalo Bill's things.

Reaching the Big Horn Basin, they would trust to luck to discover the miners there whom Buffalo Bill had been sent to rescue, and to bring in their gold.

If not, they could leave the coach, take the horses and make their way to some point where they would be safe.

If they found the miners, it was easy enough to put them out of the way and secure their treasure, and so they congratulated themselves, doubtless, that it would not be a case of "long division," as it would have been had their own three comrades not been killed.

All this Buffalo Bill and California Joe realized had been the clever plot of the two scoundrels who had turned utter defeat into a glorious victory—had placed them in the same unpleasant situation in which they themselves—Wild Tom and Rip Raps—had been left the night before.

One glance at the flying coach and horses, and the following animals led by Rip Raps, and Buffalo Bill saw that they were much beyond the range of even his rifle.

They were off and going at full speed down the valley, under the rein of Wild Tom, who, Cody well knew, was a good driver and a man of mettle, in such a case.

Cody and California Joe, standing there upon the cliff, more than a mile from the camp they had left not an hour before, were too full for utterance, and could only watch, with keenest chagrin, the rapidly receding coach and horses until they were out of sight.

But as they gazed they beheld something that caused them to start and utter a cry of amazement.

What they saw was so wholly unexpected that they could hardly believe their own eyes and each one looked at the other as if to question the veracity of their vision.

The face of each revealed to the other that what they saw was a reality—no phantom of an excited brain.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE CHASE.

WHAT the two pards upon the cliff beheld was a puff of smoke shooting out from a thicket edging the trail along which Wild Tom was furiously driving the coach, with Rip Raps following with the drove of horses.

A puff of smoke, and, instantly, Rip Raps threw his hands above his head and fell from his saddle beneath the feet of the fast hurrying horses, while, out of the thicket sprang a form and with the speed of a deer it ran along, grasped the rein of California Joe's big roan, from whose saddle Rip Raps had tumbled, and, in another moment, had checked the whole drove of horses in their flight!

Quickly they were made fast to a tree, by the lead-lariat, and away bounded the man on the trail of the coach, the slayer of Rip Raps still in the saddle!

Another moment and the coach had disappeared in some timber down the valley; a minute after the pursuer, following, also was lost to view.

The comrades on the cliff still stood looking at each other, amazedly; they seemed to find no words for utterance; when there came to their hearing from far down the valley, one, two, three shots fired in rapid succession. Then all was still.

"Joel!"

"Bill!"

"We are fools to stand here like frightened children, while we are wanted yonder."

"Right you are, Buf'ler."

"Come!"

With the word Buffalo Bill bounded away from the cliff.

California Joe was close at his heels.

Down the rugged slope they went at a tremendous pace. The valley was soon reached; then the pass, and on they ran at their best pace, rifles in their hands ready for snap-shot or quick aim.

Neither spoke; they could waste no breath in talk.

Their way led by the Springs under the cliff, and through the camp they had left little more than hour before.

The camp was cleaned of everything. The two rogues had left nothing behind worth the stealing.

On, on the pards ran, tightening their belts and keeping up the astonishing pace.

Recalling the shots from the cliff the evening before, the two runners hoped that their unknown friend was again at work—that the unseen shadower of their trail, whoever he was, was doing yet more service for them.

If it was that Grim Guardian, then they would soon be face to face with him and thus solve the secret of his identity.

So on they ran, apparently untiringly.

At last their eyes fell upon a dark object in the trail far ahead.

They knew it was no stone or stump or mound.

They suspected it was the form of one of their foes, who must have been tumbled from his horse by that first heard shot.

The led horses were still there in the thicket, where the unknown friend had hitched them.

Coming to the object, Buffalo Bill discovered that it was the fellow known in the camps as Rip Raps.

He was dead.

There were gashes upon his face, made by the hoofs of the frightened horses as they leaped over him.

The bullet of the unknown Grim Guardian of the trail as he was—had done the work of instant killing, though, for he was dead when he fell from his saddle.

This much Buffalo Bill and California Joe saw as they passed by the ghastly form in the trail.

A few rods further on, just out of the trail, were the led horses.

They were hitched to trees, but were without saddles or bridles—a fact of small importance.

Bounding up to them, each of the pursuers secured an animal, sprung upon his back, and were away in chase, no longer on foot, but well mounted. Little wonder the faces of each lighted up with satisfaction, and that California Joe gave a wild

"Whoop la!"

and that Buffalo Bill responded with the Pawnee war-cry

"Oomayah—Oomayah!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

UNDER SUSPICION.

No word was spoken, as the two plainsmen, mounted upon bare-backed horses, and with the lariats serving as bridles, rode swiftly along in pursuit of the stage coach.

Only the grim smile upon their faces indicated that they felt triumphant at their success thus far.

Their breath came quick and hard, for their long and rapid run had been a telling tax upon them; but, mounted now, they were resting as they sped along.

They knew not, of course, what was before them; but whatever it was they would face it not only undauntedly but with a cheer!

Around a bend they went, following the trail of the coach, which showed that the driver had been rushing along at the best speed of his horses and best strength of the strong vehicle.

Into a heavy growth of timber they rode, and they soon could look far ahead through vistas in the trees; but no coach was in sight!

Still there was the trail, and along it they skurried at the full speed of their horses.

At last they dashed out of the timber, and a meadow was before them, a quarter of a mile across.

At the other side was the stream referred to as bordering Indian Springs Valley.

Along its banks grew a fringe of cottonwood trees, and there among them they beheld the coach, which had come to a halt, and the horses were standing quietly, after their rapid run.

No one was upon the box, nor was any one visible near it.

As they approached they saw California Joe's chosen horse standing hitched to a cottonwood tree; but, where was the rider? and, too, where was the man who had checked or stayed the flight of the stolen coach?

They recalled that they had heard three shots fired as they stood on the cliff.

That was half an hour before, and it was pretty certain that one of those shots had caused the coach to come to a halt.

Had the driver been killed? Had their unknown guardian also met his death when those shots were fired, in return for his interference?

There was the splendid roan horse which he had ridden, but where was he?

As they drew nearer they beheld, as once before, another dark object lying in the trail.

It was not a rock, though the bowlders lay about.

They slackened their speed and drew rein by the object.

"It is Wild Tom," said Buffalo Bill, speaking for the first time.

"And he is dead, I reckon," assumed California Joe.

"Yes, had his last call."

"Whar is t'other man?"

"Our rescuer?"

"Yes, that same."

"I cannot even guess."

"Must find him, Buf'ler."

"Yes, Joe; that we must."

They saw that Wild Tom had been killed by a bullet in the center of his forehead.

He had evidently fallen from his box, for he lay all in a heap, and had rolled along after falling, from the speed with which the coach had been going.

Three hundred yards further on was the coach, in the fringe of cottonwoods, close on the creek.

There, also, was the roan horse.

As they came nearer they could see that the horse was hitched, and Buffalo Bill called out:

"Look there, Joe!"

"What is it?"

"The coach leaders and wheelers are also hitched!"

"That's so, Pard William!"

"Then we must find an unknown friend about, for that proves he is not dead or hurt."

"Sure; dead men don't hitch horses, as I can sw'ar to!"

"He overtook the coach, after shooting Wild Tom off the box, halted the horses, and must be awaiting us."

"I hope he isn't ag'in' us, Bill."

"How do you mean?"

"He appears ter be a dead shot, from the samples we has seen, and I hope he hain't a-layin' fer us."

"I never thought of that; but so far, he has been our good friend."

"It looks that way, but I has seen looks as deceivin' as Injuns."

"True; we must go slow. We are all right now; let us try and keep so."

"You go to the right, I'll take the left, and we'll dismount when we strike the creek and approach the coach from different sides, so, if he means to be an foe, we'll have him between two fires."

"Good! I'm off, Buf'ler."

With this the two left the trail, Buffalo Bill riding to the right, California Joe to the left, and soon reached the cottonwoods on the bank of the creek, three hundred yards from the coach.

It could be that, after all, the man who had done such fatal shooting was not their friend; he might be playing his cards to suit his own ends, and had set a trap for them to walk into.

So both suddenly had a suspicion of the friendly intentions of the unknown; but, right or wrong be the suspicion, it was only prudence that, circumstanced as they were, they should be most cautious, and take nothing for granted until it was proven.

CHAPTER XXVII.

MYSTIFIED.

REACHING the cottonwoods about the same time, Buffalo Bill and California Joe dismounted, made their horses fast, and gaining the bank of the little watercourse, began to approach the coach slowly and with scout wariness.

The stream-bank served as a shelter, and they knew if there was but one person, as they had every reason to believe, he could not watch them both.

In fact, it would be very difficult for him to watch one of them, shielded as they were by the banks and the thickets bordering them.

But they would not hurry, and keeping about the same pace, after twenty minutes came out in sight of each other, just where there was a well-beaten deer-trail crossing the creek.

"Well, Joe, here we are."

"Yes, Buf'ler, but whar ar' him?" answered Joe, who seemed to always take pleasure in seeing just how far the English tongue would stand twisting in grammar and vocabulary and yet allow his meaning to be well understood.

"There is the coach, not a hundred feet away."

"Yes, and he may be a-layin' fer us ther moment we shows ourselves."

"That is quite possible; so I'll find out."

With this Buffalo Bill took off his hat and hunting-coat, cut a bush and putting them on it, raised them into full view, giving the appearance of a man moving about upon the bank.

He attracted attention also by coughing.

But no shot came—no sign of enemy or friend.

"Keep it up, Bill, while I come ther snake act," said California Joe, as he crawled over the bank and began to make his way toward the coach.

But no one was visible; and at last feeling confident of this, Buffalo Bill stepped boldly into view and walked toward the coach, just as California Joe arose from the undergrowth near it and called out:

"He's either dead or has give us ther sneak, Buf'ler."

"Yes," and Buffalo Bill threw open the coach door.

There were California Joe's traps just as they had been thrown in, with all the camp utensils hastily gathered up by the two men renegades, but that was all; no person was visible.

The horses were carefully hitched to trees, but all was safe within and on top of the coach, nothing appearing to have been touched or taken.

The big span, as stated, was made fast to a tree some distance off.

"Well, Joe, as we don't see his body about, he must have slipped away."

"Sure, and on purpose, fer a fact."

"After doing us the greatest service man could do."

"Right again, Pard William."

"We needed a friend an hour ago as much as ever man needed one."

"We did that, and got one."

"And he is still unknown."

"Don't know him from ther devil, Buf'ler."

"Say rather, from a good angel, for such he has been."

"Don't take much stock in angils, Bill; they is too cloudy; but a friend I kin tie to."

"Well, whoever he may be, I hope to show my gratitude some day."

"Ditto say me too."

"But, yer seen him run out and catch thet horse?"

"Yes, I certainly did see him."

"C'u'dn't make him out—red, white, nig or Chinaman?"

"No."

"I war so upsot I didn't see all clear, but he did look to me like a Injun."

"It is no Indian's work, Joe. All I could see was a human form, running with the speed of a deer, catching the rein of your roan, throwing himself into the saddle, and disappear from sight."

"Ther same here; but who war he that he must be so mysterious about it?"

"I give it up."

"I surrenders, too; he's too much fer me. But, what's ter be did, now?"

"We'll go back to the Springs, taking our horses along, and picking up the bodies to bury, making a fresh start to-morrow."

"Bill, I is superstitious about tarnin' back."

"I am not, but I never fight a man's superstitions, Joe; so what do you propose?"

"Leave ther coach right htre, while I go back on my roan, pick up your friend Rip Raps and ther horses, and return, while you kin git Wild Tom and these two horses we left on the banks yonder."

"All right, Joe; I will be ready to push right on when you get back," assured Buffalo Bill.

California Joe mounted and rode away, while Buffalo Bill went after the horse he had ridden, took him to where the body of Wild Tom lay and threw it across the back of the animal. That done he returned to the coach.

He brought in the animal Joe had ridden, and all thus being ready for a new start, he immediately set about looking for some trace of the unknown guardian of his trail.

He was rewarded, for soon he discovered tracks near the coach in a bit of soft ground. They were fresh made, and beyond doubt were the impress of the unknown's feet. But Buffalo Bill was more than ever mystified at discerning that they were moccasined footprints!

Could it, after all, be an Indian, as Joe had suspected, who was their dead-shot guardian of the trail?

CHAPTER XXVIII.

STILL ON THE FATAL TRAIL.

WHEN California Joe returned he had the horses, and across one of them was strapped the body of Rip Raps.

"He was shot in ther head, Buf'ler, same as your man thar, and same as ther two thet got it from ther cliff yistiddy; thet shows it war ther same dead-shot."

"I guess I'll fish in ther heads fer ther bullets and see—"

"No, no, Joe! Don't do thet. These two were without doubt shot by the same man, and the bullets would be alike; but we have not the bullets fired at the other two, yesterday."

"Thet's so, and would hev ter dig 'em up to git 'em, so let it go at thet."

"Hain't made any diskivery I doesn't know, has yer?"

"Yes, Joe; I have struck sign."

"What be it?"

"The man wore moccasins."

"I see, so was a Injun."

"You wear moccasins, Joe."

"And I hain't no Injun, and others that's white might w'ar 'em. But, Pard William, what else did ye make out?"

"The tracks are yonder for you to inspect for yourself. The man was going from the coach when he made them, but the nature of the ground would prevent our following his trail."

"Don't want ter, fer if he wanted ter git better acquainted he'd interdooce himself, not levant like a man that's wanted by a marshal."

Buffalo Bill smiled at Joe's way of putting it, and added:

"I made another discovery, Joe."

"Well, pard, you has the call. Perceed."

"We heard three shots fired, in this direction."

"Yes, one louder than t'other two, it struck me."

"I noticed that, though one was from a rifle, the others from a revolver."

"Jist so I opined."

"Now, I found a revolver lying in the trail near where Wild Tom's body lay."

"I see; that's sign as means business."

"The two revolver-shots were fired first, the louder one following quickly."

"Yes, that was the order of exercise."

"From the revolver I found two shots had been fired."

"That means that Wild Tom seen his man and let fly at him."

"Yes, and the pursuer returned the fire with his rifle, knocking Wild Tom from his box."

"Yes; a plum-center shot."

"And then he rode on and caught the team right here."

"We is gittin' ther signs down as fine as birds' teeth, William, and you reads 'em and sees things jist as a dictionary spells. It makes me tucker to yer fer a man as I kin tie to, every time."

"I has heerd, Buf'ler, thet you kin outride any man on ther border, kin throw a lariat like a Mexikin, shoot dead center every time yer pulls trigger, be it rifle or revolver, and has hed thet experience with a sword thet makes yer handle a bowie knife in a way ter delight mankind, while yer kin outrun, outjump, knock down, throw over and outgrip any man in ther camps along ther Overland, and is a all-round good feller any way you is tuk."

"All these things hev I heered of yer, Buf'ler Bill, and you kin sell my scalp to a Piute ef I don't now believe it all, and I is thet proud ter know yer intimate, and be on ther same trail with yer, I can't express myself, 'cause my tongue can't git thar, bein' no flatterer and a plain spoken man."

What else further the "plain spoken" man might have said was brought to an end by a hearty laugh from Buffalo Bill, who remarked:

"Why, Joe, you are the best talker I ever heard, and have piled on the flattery until I am forced to say I have a bottle of medicine along which I must ask you to drink hearty of, though I brought it only for snake bites, you know."

"Bill, jist keep it fer snake bites, fer you may need it; but, does yer know yer hain't yit tole me whar yer is headin' fer?"

"I will to-night when we camp, for I suppose we need not remain here."

"No, let us bury ther dear departed right here, and say a prayer o' thanks over 'em thet they hain't buryin' us, and then we kin push on, me with yer, ef yer wants it so. We'll leave dead folks ahind us and strike out new, campin' whar I knows a place on ahead, with good wood, water and grass."

"All right, Joseph; and to-night we'll have a talk, when I'll tell you the trail I am on. I do not only wish you to go with me, but I need you."

"I'm with yer," was the earnest response.

The pick and shovel were lifted from the coach and the grave was dug, into which the two bodies were placed, Buffalo Bill remarking:

"We are wearing these tools bright, Joe, digging graves."

"Yes, and four of 'em thet unknown has supplied ther provender fer," was the answer.

The duty of burial over, Buffalo Bill mounted the box, and started up his team, California Joe following with the horses in lead.

It had, thus far, been a fatal trail, but Buffalo Bill would not turn back. He was on it to stay.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE CAMP-FIRE CHAT.

CALIFORNIA JOE knew the country perfectly—a fact that Buffalo Bill soon discovered, as he drove along on their way from the creek where they had found the stage awaiting them, captured by the mysterious and unknown guardian of their trail.

They had buried the bodies of the two men, Wild Tom and Rip Raps, whom this same guardian had killed; and being of a superstitious nature, California Joe seemed anxious to leave the scene of their nearly fatal adventure behind them, with all speed.

"Let the sun rise on us far from here, Buf'ler," he had urged, and Buffalo Bill was perfectly willing to humor him.

Cody, as he drove along, guided by California Joe to where they would camp for the night, had begun to feel the exceeding difficulty of his undertaking, alone.

He had not expected a pleasure trip, by any means, and had volunteered determined to face all dangers.

But dangers wholly unlooked-for had arisen; as he certainly had not counted on being attacked to kill by his own companions in the camp.

Apprehensive, however, that there might be one or more who might shadow his trail, he had prepared for them, and the death of Desperate Dave had been the result of his watchfulness.

But there had quickly ensued the trouble with the two camp hunters, the appearing of the Chinnee and his warning, with the result just as the pigtail had stated, as far as the five men being on his trail.

The last of this band had been wiped out, four of them by the act of the unknown guardian who so mysteriously haunted his trail, and one by his own hand.

But, was this warfare to continue? Had more lawless men, still hoping to get the gold he was going after, determined to follow and get his secret, continuing on, after killing him, to find Leonard Langdon and his companions, and, by pretending to be sent to their relief, take their lives and the treasures they had risked so much to secure?

After his past experience, Buffalo Bill feared that it was to be a fight clear through, with supposed friends, and so he decided to make a clean breast of it to California Joe.

He had volunteered to go on the mission of relief, alone, and thus far had surmounted all difficulties and dangers, but it seemed that Fate had guided the nomad of the hills, California Joe, to him, to be his comrade in the expedition, and as Fate had so ordered, he would ask the wilderness tramp to be his pard, well knowing that Joe could be trusted with life and a gold mine.

At last the spot California Joe had in view for a camp for the night was reached.

It was in a canyon, near its head, where a stream came tumbling over, with a roar, falling a hundred feet.

It found its way along one side of the canyon, and in the meadow strip which it fed the grass grew luxuriantly, while there was plenty of wood for camp-fires and comfort.

A ledge of rocks bounded the meadow, forming a wall like a vast breastwork. To enter the upper part of the canyon the coach had to be driven into this stream and out again, above.

"There seems to have been a natural dam across the canyon, and the stream broke through it," observe Buffalo Bill.

"Yes, and a reegemint c'u'd hold ther hull Sioux nation at bay behind these rocks," asserted Joe, confidently.

"You are right, and we have as fine a camping place here as I ever saw," was Buffalo Bill's rejoinder, as he threw the reins down, and, springing from the box, began to strip his team of their harness.

The horses were soon staked out, the wood gathered, blankets spread and a fire built.

Then supper was prepared, and when it was over with, the two pards, so strangely met, took a seat and began to talk, while the evening shadows solemnly deepened about them.

"Joe, I wish to ask you where you were going when I met you?"

"When yer saved my life, yer means?"

"With the aid of an unknown protector, yes, if you wish it so."

"I does, for I knows all I owes you and him."

"Whar was I goin', yer axes? Well, I answers—to ther Big Horn."

"The Basin?"

"Jist so, William."

"Alone?"

"Me and poor Rough and Ready was all."

"You may have been there before?"

"I has, several times."

"What for?"

"Game, pelts, ter see ther country, knock over a Injun or two, and—"

"Prospect for gold."

"Yes; jist that, Pard William?"

"Find any?"

"Thar's lots of it thar, and other metals, too."

"I tells yer, Buf'ler, it's ther richest country I ever seen, and some day it's a goin' ter be ther garding spot o' ther West, and don't you forgit it!"

"Did you ever hear of any miners going there?"

"You bet I has, and they is thar yet."

"Gold hunting?"

"With a harp, fer ther reds has made angils of 'em."

"All killed?"

"Yes, and more too."

"What do you mean?"

"Thar has been soldiers sent up thar, and they never gits into ther Basin, or, if they does, they never comes out—not any."

"It's only a short time ago a mighty fine young officer, Lieutenant Fred Bailly, and eight men went in search of some miners as had gone in and not been heerd from, and I war sent to see whar him and his men was, and I found 'em,"

"Dead?"

"All of 'em, and I'm going now inter ther Basin alone ter see ef I kin find out ther fate of them miners," Californis Joe explained, and added:

"Thar was thirty of 'em, and my idee is ther last one of 'em has been wiped out."

CHAPTER XXX.

ON THE SAME TRAIL.

"WELL, Joe, you and I are upon the same trail," informed Buffalo Bill, when he heard just what his companion was going for into the great Basin.

"No!" in much surprise.

"It is a fact."

"Now, I has been a-wonderin' ef the Buffalo Bill I has heerd so much of, but know'd so leetle, hed gone crazy, when I seen him going toward ther Big Horn Basin with a full rigged hearse, and fer what?"

"To find Leonard Langdon, brother of Captain Luke Langdon, division agent at Larimer of the Overland Stage and Pony Company."

"He were captain of the outfit, I hev heerd."

"Yes; the leader of the expedition."

"And does yer think he is alive?"

"He was six weeks ago."

"What's yer proof of that?"

"He wrote to his brother, and asked him to send him aid."

"So you is goin' with a hearse?"

Buffalo Bill laughed, and answered:

"I am going with the coach, Joe, to bring him and his two comrades out of the Basin."

"You means three of the party hain't dead?"

"They were alive six weeks ago when the letter was written."

"Why didn't Leonard come out with ther man as brought word?"

"That is jist it, Joe, and I want to talk to you about that."

"Waal, I'm ready."

"The captain found fastened upon his cabin door one morning a letter from his brother, Leonard. That letter I have with me, and will show you the whole thing, maps, directions, letter and all."

"Who brought it?"

"No one knows; but there it was on the doer, and a knock awakened the captain, who was abed at the time."

"He went to the door and found the papers fastened upon it, but he could see no one and did not know who put them there."

"But he knew his brother's writing well, so recognized it, and read all that he said with great surprise and keen interest."

"Well, what was it the letter said?"

"Leonard told of his having gone into the Basin with the miners, thirty all told, and that they had prospered as far as finding gold was concerned, but sickness and accidents and murder reduced their number to three."

"I see—only three left of all that went in."

"Just that; and these three, he said, were too used up and weak to make their way out with their store of gold, so were then in hiding, awaiting aid."

"Unable even to ride on horseback, Leonard Langdon begged his brother to send a coach after them and their gold."

"He wanted ter come in style I should say."

"Why, as they all were too used up to ride the long way out of the Basin on horseback, and the coach could carry them and their gold, it was very natural for him to suggest a coach."

"And you started out alone?"

"I did, for the letter demanded that but one man should come, on the errand, no more."

"Thet Miner Langdon are a level-headed man."

"He explained that they would not trust more with their big secret, and stated, also,

that if more than one man came they would not find them. To find them he sent a map and full directions to reach a certain point, and they would be on the watch there."

"And if only one come they'd show up and pan out?"

"Yes, that was the promise."

"And if more come, they'd sneak and not show up at all?"

"Yes, so the letter announced."

"And you was the one Cap'n Langdon picked out?"

"It called for a volunteer and I offered."

"He were wise ter send you, and just why the reason is because you would be about the onlp man ter git through; thet, I kin sw'ar to; and when got thar yer w'u'dn't steal ther gold and murder the owner of it."

"Yer'd be about ther only man ter git back safe, or I misses my reck'nin'."

"So far yer has got along whar other folks w'u'd be sleepin' quiet with toes turned up to ther daises six feet underground."

"Now, William, my pard, yer has done well, and yer'll git through, while I offers myself as a comrade if yer has faith in my helpin' yer, in the mighty resky business yer knows as it is."

"That is just what I was going to ask you, Joe, and I'll share my profit with you."

"I hain't arter pay, William, for thet don't count whar I kin sarve a pard like you."

"Yes, in course I'll go, and we'll find 'em or the'r bones, and in that case, even, onless somebody else in ther shape o' Injuns, found 'em ther gold mo'ut be far away from whar ther bones is."

"I kinder thought thet ther last one o' them thirty miners was dead; but ther letters proves thet three was then livin' and humanity demands thet we find 'em."

"And, as I opines about sich men they must be out o' provisions and in a bad way, so we'll push along jest as hasty as the hosses kin toddle."

"But, I say, William, I can't onderstand jest who c'u'd hev tuk thet letter to Cap'n Luke Langdon. Maybe he are ther one as is guardian' your trail now, Buf'ler! What say?"

"Ah! that maybe so; it's a good suggestion!" admitted Bill.

"But I am more than glad, Joe, that you are to be with me," he added, fervently.

"So is I, William, an' I wouldn't like it to be otherwise."

"I were huntin' ter find out about them same miners, and I guesses now we'll git ter ther end o' this trail, safe an' sound. Only, who is ther feller shadderin' us, and thet we don't know? Is he leadin' us on for some deep game of his own, or is he a friend through thick and thin?"

"I give it up," was the reply of Buffalo Bill. "We'll only know when we find out."

"Jest that!" soberly assented Joe.

CHAPTER XXXI.

AN ARROW'S FLIGHT.

THE two pards spread their blankets beneath a group of scrub pines growing upon the edge, where they could see any one approaching and thus guard their camp.

But they did not expect further trouble there, and the night passed without any disturbance.

The horses were well rested in the morning, and, after breakfast, the two pards started again upon the dangerous and unbroken trail.

The loose horses were tied, head and head, and were allowed to follow the coach, while California Joe divided his time between riding on in advance and picking the trail, or following to see that all was right and safe in the rear.

Before leaving camp Joe had looked over Buffalo Bill's map, and the directions furnished by Miner Leonard Langdon, and decided that the course indicated was the trail the miners had taken on their way into the Basin.

"I know about where the spot is that this trail ends, Buf'ler, and if I remember, as I think I does, it's in a big canyon, with cliffs all around, and it's up thar on the cliff these miners will be, watchin' fer yer."

"Yer see, he says ter make yer noon camp jist whar ther trail ends, and ter remain right thar until one of 'em puts in

an appearance, which same they'll do, if you is alone, in a couple o' days."

"Which will give them time to discover, from their lookout, if I really am alone, unless I fool them."

"As you kin, by leavin' me and three extra horses back a good distance on ther trail."

"Yes; just that."

"Well, we'll push ahead right peert and see whar thar is ter tarn up at ther end of ther trail."

So it was that the comrades pushed ahead and so continued, steadily, with no interruptions.

As California Joe would go on ahead from time to time, and pick a way for the coach, Buffalo Bill was enabled to drive at a better pace, and when noon came he had made a fair morning's journey of it, considering the nature of the trail he had to drive over.

Here and there they saw traces of where the miners had camped, in going to the Big Horn Basin, for trees were cut down and logs half burned, showing that the coach was following the trail mapped out by Leonard Langdon.

After a halt of an hour at noon they continued on, and Buffalo Bill began to feel that if any one else from the camps intended giving him trouble it would be upon the return.

Should they find the three miners alive, and a short rest with good food build them up, with their aid and California Joe's Buffalo Bill was assured that it would take a considerable force to rob him of the treasure, and this kind of an attack he did not expect from the camps, considering the ill success of those that had already attempted to waylay and "do for" him.

If they gained any advantage, it would have to be through an ambush, and with Joe and himself to scout on ahead, and one of the miners to drive the coach, he did not fear being surprised.

So he did not allow danger on the return to worry him then, and nerved himself to face whatever danger or trouble might at any moment confront him.

Joe had again ridden to the front, and was going through a narrow canyon, several hundred yards in advance of the coach, when he started and grasped his weapons as he suddenly heard a whirring sound, from just where he could not at first determine.

It sounded like the whirr of an arrow.

And an arrow it was, for there suddenly came down into the trail before California Joe that Indian weapon.

It stuck quivering into the ground not thirty feet before Joe, who hastily, with the instinct of safety, spurred to a place of safety close under the cliff nearest to him.

Buffalo Bill witnessed Joe's act, and knew at once that something was wrong, so drove quickly forward to his comrade's support.

But, California Joe raised his hand to signal to him to halt where he was, and he drew rein at once.

He then beheld Joe go forward boldly, no longer seeking the shelter of the cliffs, and, dismounting from his horse saw him pick up the arrow.

That done, his comrade beckoned to him to come on.

Quickly Buffalo Bill did so, and holding up the arrow Joe said:

"This scart me, Buf'ler, when I heerd it a-comin', but seein' thet it were not intended to be dangersome, I jist picked it up."

"Yes, and it has a slip of paper wrapped close around it, Joe. It is a signal, no doubt."

"That's jest what it is, pard; so see what it is, and whose correspondin' with us away out here."

As he spoke California Joe handed over the arrow to Buffalo Bill.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A MYSTERIOUS MESSAGE.

BUFFALO BILL looked at the arrow handed to him and said quietly:

"Sioux."

"Yes, jest that."

"Now for the paper."

About the slender shaft was tightly rolled a piece of paper, fully six inches long, and tied thereon with human hair, at each end.

"Indian, from the hair, Joe."

"Yes, jest what it is."

"It was well tied on."

"First class: knew his business."

Unrolling the paper it proved to be a piece of white foolscap upon which was drawn the map of a trail!

"Ah! it is our trail!"

"Sure it is; but, pard, thar's changes."

"Yes, here is a change right here, marked 'cut off six miles.'

"Then they appear all along to the Basin, these cut offs, saving from two to ten miles each—yes, over a hundred miles in all, I see, from the trail we are following and made by Leonard Langdon."

"Who drawed it, Bill?"

"Our unknown guardian, Joe."

"Sure it is; for who else could it be?"

"The map begins here at this canyon, as you see, and tracing our trail with these dotted cut offs it marks camps for both noon and night."

"So I sees, William!"

"This assigns us about the distance per day we can travel. It is drawn with real skill, while what is written, as you see, has been printed with a pencil. The more the mystery, Joe! So I ask again—who can be our guardian?"

"Dunno," fer a fact. Couldn't guess fer a old hat's wuth."

"He certainly is a friend."

"Yes, but wish he'd show up all the same," and the old ranger seemed in a serious mood.

"Why?" asked Buffalo Bill.

"Well, it makes me feel shivery, this kind o' work I can't understand nor see."

"We saw him."

"Yes, got a graveyard glimpse of him."

"You don't think it is a ghost's work do you, Joe?" and Buffalo Bill laughed.

"Waal, ther' is folks as believes in sperrits, and thet same am I; but I hain't heerd thet they git around by day, though nothin' that happens in this wild country kin surprise me, now."

"I think it is some one of the miners who can only guide and help us unseen until he finds out if we are honest in our attempt to rescue his pards. I cannot account for it in any other way, Joe. No other person but one interested would take all this trouble, it seems to me."

"Unless it be ther sperrit of one of ther dead miners a-helpin' his pards out."

"Nonsense! I take stock only in live flesh and blood, Joe; but I can feel that whoever our guardian of the trail is, he's a grim one, a true one and our good pard thus far; but see, here is something printed on the back of this map."

"Read it."

Buffalo Bill read aloud:

"Push on to camps marked."

"Those you seek to aid cannot last much longer."

"Your greatest danger will be upon your return."

"Well, Joe, what do you think of that?"

"It's plain talk, fer a dead sure fact, William!"

"Yes, and we must obey it."

"Sart'in. Sure!"

"You believe in trusting our mysterious friend, then?"

"Yes, for he has proved a trusty pard, be he flesh or sperrit."

"And he doubtless has his eye upon us now."

With instinctive caution California Joe started as though to unmask trouble, but laughed with Buffalo Bill when he realized what he was doing.

"Well, Joe, we will push on again, for it would be useless to attempt to find our guardian, as, not being birds, we cannot scale those cliffs, and to go around and hunt for his trail would be loss of precious time, even if we found the man, which probably we would not do."

"So says I, Pard William."

"One thing more is certain—that should we make a mistake he will set us right, if he goes on the trail further, which is not likely. As he says, our greatest danger will be upon our return, and that is what I have thought all along. If he quits our company now, I hope he'll be on hand then."

"Just what I hopes, Pard William."

"But, Joe, no need to bother with that"

now. Our guardian says here that those we are going for are in need of our aid greatly, which goes to show beyond question that he knows just where our trail leads."

"Straight as that thar arrow, that seems."

"And the message informs us they cannot last much longer. Are they besieged by Indians, or are they starving? Which is it, Joe?"

"Dunno, fer a fact, William."

"Joe, my friend?" inquiringly.

"Yes, Buf'ler; what is it?"

"The man who is now our guardian is the one who put that map and letter upon Chief Langdon's cabin door."

"You are about right thar, Buf'ler; that same is my opine."

"But why did he not reveal himself to Langdon?"

"Why don't he reveal hisself to us, Bill, now that thar's no need of any more secrecy?"

"That is another mystery, Joe."

"I guess it's about as you has it down—that it's one o' the miners as is yet able to git about, and so went fer help."

"He is watchin' ter see jist what help are sent out, and if O. K. he'll help, and ef not he'll take a hand ag'in' us when he thinks best."

"Yes, and may be letting us take the relief there for himself to make use of."

"By killin' us after we have did our duty?"

"That is it; but it's only a mere supposition. The whole thing is an all-around puzzle, Joe; but I think we can solve it," was Buffalo Bill's response, and manner and tone both showed that he was in the game to stay.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE SURROUND.

BOTH Buffalo Bill and Joe were impressed by the coming to them as it did of the mysterious message from a more mysterious unknown source.

They went on their way with even more watchfulness than before, in spite of the statement that their greatest danger would be upon their return.

After consultation they decided that they would follow the direction of the trail-trace which they had received in such a strange manner.

They would try the first "cut-off;" if that proved all right, they would take the others in succession.

The first cut-off did prove satisfactory, and comparing it with the direct trail, they saw that it had saved them the distance marked on the paper.

Their night camp was made where it was indicated on the map, and though he had been over the trail several times, California Joe frankly confessed that he did not know that the distance could be thus shortened, and had never been to the camping-ground where they then were.

It had been a question, as they progressed, where they would find water for their night camps, but the paper trail-trace had lines and signs to show just where there were streams and springs, one day's travel being specially marked:

"Fill casks and canteens at this camp—no water until next night's camp. Take wood also."

"Well, he downs me in knowin' this country and no mistake," was California Joe's comment as they found the trail panning out just as the new map said, and Buffalo Bill began to see how his horses and himself would have suffered had he stuck to the trail which the miners evidently had taken on their way into the Basin.

Thus a week passed away upon the rugged stretch, and many a long mile had been put between the two undaunted men and the station on the Overland.

So far they had not seen an Indian, yet they traveled by day and watched by night as if they well knew that they were liable to be set upon any time by the redskins.

If they did not meet any, some prowling band might cross their trail, and at once follow it, for wheels going up into that country were not known—at least not since the lost miners had taken their wagons into the Big Horn two years or more before, and by that same trail.

Their grim guardian they had not heard from since the arrow message in the narrow canyon: had he turned back there, or was he still shadowing them?

These questions Buffalo Bill and California Joe asked each other at each camping-place.

The wear and tear of the long trail upon the horses began to tell, pushed as they now were, for the daily travel cut out for them by the new map showed forced marches to reach the miners in time.

The animals took turns in being hitched to the coach, and Buffalo Bill was glad that the capture of the five horses of the party under Wild Tom been made, as it would have been more than those he had originally started with could stand.

"Thar's a pretty valley, Bill, but as it's on one of ther cut offs I never seen it afore," said California Joe one day, as they passed over a ridge into a beautiful valley shut in on all sides by mountains.

"It is, indeed, a beautiful valley, Joe, and what a place for settlers, did they dare come here!" and lost in admiration at the loveliness of the scene, Buffalo Bill's eyes closely scanned the landscape far and near; but, suddenly he drew rein, with a cry to California Joe, and the warning words:

"See! we are completely surrounded by Indians!"

One sweeping glance was sufficient to show California Joe mounted redskins ahead, behind and on all sides, riding out of the timber to surround them.

"Buffalo Bill, we is scalped! But some Injuns dies afore I say quits," was the significant rejoinder of California Joe.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A FORLORN HOPE.

THERE seemed not an atom of hope for the two men, Buffalo Bill and California Joe.

It looked like a fight to the bitter end and sure death to follow.

The valley was a beautiful one, too serene in its loveliness to be marred by deadly strife.

Buffalo Bill had drawn rein the moment he had seen the danger.

At first it appeared as though his eyes were deceiving him, for could it be possible that he beheld a hundred mounted warriors riding in line slowly out of the timber three-quarters of a mile ahead?

His eyes swept to the right, and half a mile away he beheld another band of redskins.

To the left a third party of red horsemen came into view.

To the rear there were yet more of them.

Nearly half a thousand of mounted foes were in sight, ahead, to the right and left and in their rear!

From three-quarters to half a mile distant they were, advancing, their ponies moving at a slow walk.

They evidently were sure of their prey!

No wonder California Joe had averred that they were "already scalped!"

Yet his grim courage had constrained him to add that Indians would fall before they got his scalp.

And Buffalo Bill, though he realized how hopeless was their position, would likewise make a stand until death palsied his hands.

There would be wailing in the Indian village over many braves slain!

He and California Joe would make names that would go down in legend in the Indian tribes, never to be forgotten.

And the story of their fight for life against such odds would be told, some day, by the Indians who were there, and their comrades and friends would know just how they died and call them heroes.

Buffalo Bill glanced into the face of California Joe, to read there the same thoughts, the same determination, that were in his own.

They were entering the fatal Big Horn Basin, fatal to so many palefaces before them!

The place where Buffalo Bill had halted was a fortunate one for them, for a considerable mass or group of boulders was just

there, with stunted pines growing about them.

Instantly he drove his team right into the center of this natural fortress.

In that retreat they were fairly well concealed, as were also the horses that California Joe followed in with.

All were made fast around the coach.

They would form a breastwork of horseflesh as they were shot down.

There were plenty of rifles and small guns in the coach. These were quickly taken out and made ready for use. They were already loaded.

There were boulders before and behind—all around, in fact—to protect horses and coach. There were two openings, however, through which the attack was sure to come and the two friends were each to guard one.

Bags, rolls of blankets, cushions and all else available were so arranged as to protect them as well as possible.

They had no hope of any more than a temporary success, at best. All that there seemed possible to the two dauntless men was to strike a blow never to be forgotten by their implacable foe—to make their own scalps at the belt of some chief count for one hundred braves, who never again would take the war-trail.

"I see Crows, Cheyennes, and Blackfeet, Joe; and there is their great head chief, Wa-sha-kie, if I am not misthken, for I have seen him twice before."

"You are right, Pard William; it's Wa-sha-kie! Oh! but this is going to be a fight, Buf'ler—jest a death roster."

"Yes, a blind man could see that, Joe."

"Is you ready to fight to the death, Pard William?"

"I am; and you, Joe?"

"Jest the same. Shake on it!"

The two true-as-steel comrades grasped hands.

It was the death-pledge of two as brave souls as ever wore human guise.

No quivering was in their flashing eyes.

No trembling of their high-strung nerves. Thus they stood, silent, a full minute, as if in solemn commune with their own death thoughts.

Buffalo Bill was the first to break the silence.

"See!" he said, scanning the slowly-moving line of the red host. "See, Joe; they are breaking file and are beginning to stretch out, to surround us in a great circle."

"Yes, pard, that's jest what they reckon doing. It's Injun tactics, every time," answered the old man of the hills, carefully scanning the redskins' movement.

"Let them surround," added the scout. "It will help us to select our targets—a red-breast for each shot. I shall take Wa-sha-kie, for I found him badly hurt once; I gave him my horse, fixed up his leg, filled his grub-bag for him and let him go, although he was then on the war-path after my scalp, and might have taken it, had not his pony slipped down a cliff with him and was killed, hurting the chief badly, as I have said."

"Well, he'll prize your scalp ther more fer it, Bill, and mine, too, fer ther same reason, as I onst helped him out of a scrape when he come ter ther camps fer a pow-wow."

"Ther fellers was goin' ter scalp him and send him back, him and ther four chiefs, without their ha'r, but I put in my chin-music and said as how they hed come thar in trust fer a council o' war, an' so I'd kill ther man thet laid hands on 'em, and I stood guard right thar and then ontill they rode away, with thar scalps still on."

"But now we is in for it, Pard William, and our scalps will look tip-top in Wa-sha-kie's tepee."

"Well, Joe, there will be some Indians who will not see them there," was the grim response.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE TIGHTENING COIL.

THE movements of the Indians were certainly imposing, to say the least of them.

They had appeared like red specters coming out of the timber on four sides of the coach; they had moved with their ponies in a very slow walk, but as they moved nearer they began gradually to stretch out their

lines upon each side until they finally met, in a great circle, which completely encompassed the position taken by the two pards, the line being fully a quarter of a mile from the boulder fort.

When this circle was completed, all came to a halt and the horsemen stood not over ten feet apart.

Up and down over the inequalities of the ground, across meadow, over hills and through timber the line extended, visible everywhere to Buffalo Bill and California Joe.

Right ahead in their trail down the valley was a group of braves inside the circle.

In their midst was the head-chief, Wa-sha-kie, whom Buffalo Bill had recognized.

About him were others also wearing the eagle-feather war-bonnets of chiefs.

It was a distinguished gathering.

They were in council, and in no hurry, so sure were they of their prey.

They saw to them a strange sight—a stage-coach entering the unknown land of the Big Horn Basin, at least a land unknown to pale-faces, save the few who had gone there to meet their doom.

Were their eyes not deceiving them—could a coach of the Overland, a vehicle that had to fight for existence in following the trail further south that stretched through their country toward the Land of the Setting Sun, be really invading the Big Horn Basin?

And this, too, unguarded by an army of pale-face soldiers!

Such a strange sight had been reported to Chief Wa-sha-kie by his young men, and he had called his bands of braves together to see it.

They would meet it at certain point; they would surround it, and then the daring and presumptuous palefaces should know that they must take the trail from there to the Happy Hunting-grounds.

Braves in large numbers had flocked to the rendezvous when called by Wa-sha-kie.

All were anxious to see this strange sight, not to know of it from other lips—all were anxious to be in at the battle.

So they had met in the valley ahead of the coach, and taken up position to surround it. No mistake must be made; there must be no escape for the presuming palefaces who had invaded the Big Horn country.

At last, in the broad glare of day, they beheld the coach come into view.

It was driven by one paleface seated upon the box; it was drawn by six horses.

Another paleface followed close in the rear, leading other horses.

Wa-sha-kie rubbed his eyes and looked again.

There it was! A coach on a deadly trail! His young men had not deceived him; they had spoken with truthful tongues.

Were other palefaces in the coach?

What if there were?—if a dozen were there? Were not his warriors half a thousand in number?

What prompted the strange driver of the coach to come there, the redskins wondered.

There seemed something uncanny in the daring deed to the Indians, and this it was that prompted them to go slow—to make the surround and then decide what further steps to take.

And while they halted Buffalo Bill and California Joe watched and waited for the blow that was to come.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

UNACCOUNTED FOR.

"PARD JOE, it looks as though we had to die here, and I am sorry you came along with me, to end like this, after all you have passed through in your life."

"Now, look a-here, Bill! Don't you waste no more sorrow on me than yer does on yerself, fer I has lived with my life in my hand, and is ready ter go whenever my time comes."

"I is a older man than you; I is beginning to look at ther world from ther other side of forty, while you has life before yer and kin look forward to bein' happy and winnin' fame—thet is, yer could do thet if we wasn't goin' ter be scalped in less than half a hour."

"We both is in it, now, to fight it out and you kin bet I ll fight ther Injuns as goes

along with us clean to ther corral gates o' ther happy hunting grounds, only stay right near me, ef we passes in our chips, fer I don't think they'll know much about me up yonder, and I wants you for my pard."

Buffalo Bill could but smile at Joe's quaint way of putting it, but replied:

"All right, pard; we'll be together alive or dead."

They had their eyes intently fixed upon the Indian circle which had come to a full stand, the surround being complete.

The nearest Indian was just about a quarter of a mile away, and Buffalo Bill knew that his heavy long range rifles would readily kill at that distance.

All the weapons were ready, as we have noted, for rapid firing.

"We will take the chief and his group of chiefs first, Joe, and can get in a dozen or so long range shots; then we'll open with the other guns as fast as we can fire, and end up with our revolvers, and I think we can make a good record," was Buffalo Bill's explanation and order to his comrade.

"I is sart'in of it; but see! suthin' has gone wrong with 'em!"

Evidently something was the matter, for a movement was apparent along the whole circle.

Buffalo Bill quickly scanning the encircling line, said:

"There is the trouble, Joe."

"Yas, a Injun ridin' along the line and blanketed."

"Yes, he has his head and all covered with a black blanket, and you know what that means?"

"It means a warnin' from a medicine-man thet they is goin' wrong?"

"Yes, Joe, and his coming is creating a sensation."

"See! He is mounted upon a black horse, and his black blanket completely hides him—head and form."

"Yes, he's got suthin' ter say and you bet it's in our favor, William. He wouldn't interfere, at this stage o' ther game ef it wasn't fer good cause."

"I hope it is in our favor, for we certainly need friends just now."

The horseman upon whom the eyes of the two men were riveted, had ridden out from a growth of timber through which the coach had come.

He was mounted upon a black pony, which, it could be seen even at that distance, had a very long mane and sweeping tail.

The rider sat with bowed body in the saddle, his head and shoulders completely covered by a large black blanket.

This, as Buffalo Bill and California Joe knew, was a secret sign among the Indians to mean a warning to halt on the trail they were then pursuing.

And the Indians had so taken it, for all were at a stand-still and every eye was upon the somber form riding in a slow walk toward the chief, Wa-sha-kie.

The two pards saw the group of chiefs open as he drew near, leaving their great leader alone.

Up to him rode the blanketed horseman, halting just in front of him.

Buffalo Bill had his fieldglass to his eyes and said:

"Now we'll see the result of the warning, Joe."

"Yes, pretty soon."

They beheld the arms of the muffled form rise above his head and move in a peculiar manner.

"He is asking by signals if the chief will hear his warning."

"What does the chief answer, Pard Buf-ler?"

"He signifies that he will, for the muffled form has thrown off the blanket, which means Good Medicine."

"Then I hopes he preaches him inter lettin' us alone."

"So do I, and not turning us back, either."

"What's he doin' now, pard?"

Buffalo Bill still held his glasses to his eyes and answered:

"The chief is listening to what he has to say, and is evidently impressed, for he shows no sign of anger or impatience."

"Is ther medicine in war-paint, William?"

"He is painted black, only."

"That means thet he is ag'in' ther trail they is followin' and thet he's hed a dream of bad luck ef they keeps on."

"I hope they'll heed the dream, Joe, if that is what has brought him here."

"Ditto me, William. How does ther pow-wow seem ter pan out, now?"

"All right for the medicine-man, for the chief has turned his back upon us; and see! the whole band are preparing to ride away!"

"Good! then they is scared off from scalpin' us, Bill."

"It certainly seems so, Joe; but, let us see what the result will be," answered Buffalo Bill, quietly. "The big medicine-man may not have it all his own way; for some of the warriors may have something to say."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE BLANKETED HORSEMAN.

THE two pards kept their position and watched with greatest interest the unexpected movements of the Indians.

The chief led the way, the again muffled form of the medicine-man riding by his side.

As the chief rode away first one brave from the right would follow, then one from the left, falling in behind each other, until they became a long line of horsemen, nearly a mile in length, riding single file, at a slow walk.

Over the distant hill at the end of the valley passed the chief, and the line winding behind him carried out California Joe's remark thoroughly:

"Ef thet ain't a spotted snake then I never seen one, and jist as treacherous and deadly."

"Yes, Joe; it certainly looks like a huge moccasin, crawling away to cover. But, they are going our way, you notice."

"Yes, right up the valley, which is our trail, Buf'ler; we can't take any other, now."

"I don't like that a little bit, Joe."

"Nor I, William; not a bit! Let's git on ther roof of ther ole huss and take a better squint through the glass."

"No, Joe; no such move as that, now."

"Why not, Pard Bill?"

"Why, don't you see if we do that, they'll know we are but two?"

"They knows thet anyway, pard."

"Not so, Joseph. They saw the two of us but they did not know how many might be hidden in the coach."

"Fer a fact, William. Yer head is wiser'n mine."

"If they think we have a dozen fighting men along, why, they will be careful about attacking us, should any young braves, unheeding the warning of the blanketed horseman, take a notion to attack us, anyhow."

"Right you are, Buf'ler. I sees the wisdom of your opine. We won't git on ther top o' ther huss."

"When they have been gone from sight some little time, Joe, I'll slip out and see just where they are and what doing, and when I signal you to come on you can."

"It's risky, that, pard."

"It is equally as risky staying here, Joe, for they can wipe us out whenever they wish if they are so inclined. We must push on, and might as well take the chances, for I do not believe you are in favor of turning back to retrace our long trail and own up beat."

"I hain't built that way, Pard Bill."

"I know that."

The two comrades in peril continued to watch the Indian column until the last red horseman filed out of sight, and as the last one disappeared Buffalo Bill hastily mounted Joe's horse, which was already saddled, and rode away, to spy upon the retreating column.

Joe immediately began preparations to follow with the coach and led-horses when he should get the signal from his comrade.

Buffalo Bill did not ride away upon the trail of the Indians, but kept well away from it.

He had seen a high point at the end of the valley, which he could ascend, and from which to command a view of the country beyond the valley—this point, or hill-top being over a mile from the spot of their enforced halt.

California Joe watched his pard as he rode

away at a canter and clearly saw him reach the foot of the lookout, dismount and ascend the steep on foot.

Cody had been right in his conjecture: the hill did command a grand view of the country beyond.

It was at the end of the valley, and the Indians in their retreat had passed along to the further side over a ridge.

Reaching the hill-top Buffalo Bill sought a clump of bushes, and thus shielded from possible discovery he pushed through until he could obtain a view of the country and determine just where his foes were.

He discovered, to his joy, that the long line had filed to the right after leaving the valley, and were still crawling, snake-like, on way of retreat or withdrawal.

Raising his glass to his eyes he distinctly discerned the head chief, the others, and the long line of following braves, but failed to perceive the muffled form of the medicine-man.

The way the Indians were heading, was toward a large village which Buffalo Bill had learned was in a range of mountains which he saw far away in the distance.

Had the reds really been scared off by the medicine-man and were they on their way to the village?

It certainly appeared so, and yet, that seemed unaccountable—that a great war-party should be so controlled by a medicine-man.

Running his glass slowly back along the line Buffalo Bill suddenly discovered the blanketed horseman.

His face was turned toward the rear of the Indian column, and his horse was at a halt.

The Indians, still in single file, were passing slowly past him, and as they did so he waved his arms to and fro.

Again was he muffled in his black blanket, and his waving arms beneath it had a weird look.

The braves gazed at him as they rode by, but it seemed that all passed in utter silence.

Watching them closely Buffalo Bill beheld the last brave ride by the muffled horseman and disappear over a farther ridge.

Then he saw the blanketed horseman ride slowly down toward the center of the valley where the coach must pass, for there lay the only possible trail for the big vehicle.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

MYSTERIOUS MOVEMENTS.

FROM this point of view Buffalo Bill watched the black draped horseman most attentively.

Who was he that held such power over the Indians?

What warning could he have given that would drive five hundred warriors away from their prey?

What influence had he exerted to save two palefaces from the savages who certainly held them wholly at their mercy?

It was a mystery the wary scout and experienced borderman could not solve. He had been a devoted student of Indian customs, redskin human nature, their signs, their motives and their superstitions; he knew that any brave of influence "seeing a vision," dreaming a dream of ill-fortune, or having a warning from the Great Spirit, could check a plan already formed for a battle or an expedition.

In the very moment of what seemed their triumph over Joe and himself, this muffled horseman had appeared—had checked their intended rush upon the coach and its defenders—had been received by the great chief, an able general, with a reputation for daring and splendid deeds, who had submissively listened to this mysterious medicine of the sable blanket!

It was all like a dream vision, yet proved to be a wonderful reality.

Yes, he spake to the great chief the words of spirit warning, and so impressed had the chief been that he had at once turned his back upon his prey, and had, without apparent protest, taken the back trail to his village—leaving his prize and the coveted scalps in the valley, he had called his young men off, and all because of a warning!

Who was this redman in black?

That was the question Buffalo Bill asked himself over and over again.

But now, there the man was before him, and the deeply interested scout resolved to penetrate the mystery.

The Man in Black had dared to turn back toward the palefaces; and more, he was coming directly toward the trail which the coach must follow!

Determining to first signal to California Joe to come on, and then return to watch the Man in Black, as he now called him, Buffalo Bill went back out of the thicket until he came in view of the distant coach.

His glass showed that California Joe had the horses all in lead behind the coach, and was then seated upon the box, reins in hand, watching the spot from whence the signal was to be given.

Taking his red silk handkerchief Cody waved it three times slowly around his head, for that was the sign agreed upon for California Joe to leave his position and follow the valley trail.

He had nearly two miles to drive to reach the spot where the Red Man in Black must strike the trail in the valley below.

To reach the same spot Buffalo Bill would have little over half a mile to travel.

The signal was seen and answered, and California Joe at once drove out of the stone-fort retreat, which half an hour before the two parties were sure would be the scene of their death, and once clear of the boulder group, the brave wood pilot headed the horses down the valley.

Seeing this, Buffalo Bill returned through the thicket to his former point of observation.

There was the Indian horseman, and he still was riding toward the trail.

His black blanket, however, no longer enveloped his form, but now hung across the back of his horse.

Watching him keenly, Buffalo Bill beheld him dismount, and stretch his lariat full length across the narrow valley! This done, the man of mystery then remained leaning against his saddle for several minutes—after which he walked to the center of the lariat, and seemed to be fastening something to it.

As he stepped away, the glass revealed a small white spot.

"An Indian who writes! That is certainly a letter, and it is for me," inferred the attentive watcher, and with this he sprang through the thicket and gave a shout or whoop which he knew the Red Man in Black must hear.

The shout was heard, but the effect was startling.

With a leap, the man was in his saddle, and like the wind, his black horse went flying away on the trail the Indians had taken, while the surprised and provoked Buffalo Bill muttered:

"Now what does that mean? Is he my guardian of the trail? Why does he flee? Who and what is he?"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

A REDSKIN WHO WROTE.

WHEN the Red Man in Black stretched the lariat across the trail, as he did, and fastened something like a slip of paper, as it appeared to Buffalo Bill, the latter could but believe that it was some communication meant for him.

He had seen the warning of the mysterious horseman in the black blanket turn the Indians from their intended attack upon the coach, and then to see him return to the trail which the stage must follow, in pushing northward, there was every indication that it was meant as a warning or signal to him.

Hoping to communicate with the mysterious man, Buffalo Bill had revealed himself by stepping out of the thicket.

The result surprised the scout, for that the man should flee like a frightened deer was incomprehensible.

Could it be that he had not intended the lariat across the trail for him?

Could it be a warning to some one else, feeling that the coach would turn back, having seen its way haunted by Indians in great numbers?

Had the blanketed horseman intended to save the coach, believing it driven by other than it was?

And then, had he failed to recognize him when he stepped from the thicket as the one he wished to save?

But there was a more important question yet, and that was—had not the Indian horse-

man gone after the braves who had so silently retreated, to call them back?

"I will see what that lariat means, and if hostile to us, we can but go back to the rocks where we were and fight it out," muttered Buffalo Bill, a grim expression on his resolute face.

Returning to his horse, he mounted, rode around the hill and at a gallop went down the valley to where the lariat had been stretched.

There it was across the trail, and in its center, about where the coach would be expected to pass on the unbeaten trail, was a slip of paper actually pinned on with a pin!

That this was a surprise to the Lone Driver may well be surmised, but he quickly unfastened the paper from the lariat, and opening it, to his yet greater surprise saw that it contained a dozen lines of writing, in a bold hand, and evidently was the work of an educated person!

There was no address, no signature to the message, and what was written was as follows:

"The Indians will make no other attack, unless a few young braves seek to do so."

"Hasten on, or you may be too late."

"Returning, watch the trail well ahead guard your camp at night, for your own people will prove your fall, tempted by the gold you will be expected to get and bring out of the Basin."

This was all.

With this warning showing great friendship, why had the blanketed horseman fled at sight of him?

Buffalo Bill was more mystified than ever.

What strange influence held he over the old chief, Wa-sha-kie, to drive him from his prey, as he certainly had done?

Thrusting the paper into his pocket, with a sigh of relief at its contents, Buffalo Bill turned to ride back to his comrade.

He found California Joe coming along at as brisk a pace as the rough way permitted and almost as he started the coach came into view.

So Buffalo Bill waited for him, and as the old wilderness ranger came up he called out:

"What's up, Buf'ler?"

"I've got a letter."

"A letter? Well, I'll sw'ar! Whar did you git it?"

"Right here in the trail."

"I don't see no post-office, Pard Bill."

"You see that lariat?"

"Yas, I sees it, and it means suthin' stretched across ther trail. Is it a hold-up fer us? Is that yer letter?"

"No, it held a real ink and paper letter for me."

"Don't say! Anything in that P. O. fer me?"

"Yes, as mnch for you as for me."

"Read it, pard; give me the news."

Buffalo Bill did so, and California Joe then said:

"The Red Man in Black writ it, you thinks?"

"Yes; no one else, Joe."

"Waal, he talks dead-sure sense. But, William, who be he?"

"An Indian who writes."

"They is scarce as feathers on a horse."

"Now and then you find one who has learned something from the whites."

"That's so, and if palefaces keeps the'r eyes open they kin learn suthin' from Injuns."

"Indeed they can, Joseph! We would not be here if we had not learned much from the redskins. But, Joe, who do you think he was?"

"Not knowin' can't articulate, Bill."

"I think I know."

"Does yer?"

"Yes."

"Jist shout."

"We have been mysteriously guarded along our trail by some one."

"And it hain't Providence."

"It is the one who saved you at the pass, who has before warned us, who kept the Indians from scalping us but an hour ago, and who is still shadowing us like a flying out-post and grim guard."

"Ther Injun who writes us letters? Is he that same?"

"Yes—that same, Joe!"

"Bill, who in the name of wonder is he?"

"I give it up."

CHAPTER XL.

WHY A WAR-CRY WAS NOT UTTERED.

WHEN Head Chief Wa-sha-kie heard from his young men scouts that they had seen a "wheel tepee," as they called the stage-coach, two men and a number of horses coming into their country, he could not believe them.

He sent his best scouts out, with orders not to be seen themselves, but to bring him the truth of what the young bucks had reported.

These skilled scouts returned with word that they had seen the "wheel tepee" for themselves—that it was driven by one man, drawn by four horses, and another paleface followed, leading some ponies.

They had seen no other men, but felt sure there were a number inside the tepee on wheels.

They believed it was some trick of the palefaces to kill Indians, for there might be in the moving tepee many men hidden, and there also might be a large force of soldiers following.

Then, also, there might be "wheel guns"—cannon—in the wheeled tepee, to thunder out death at them.

Wa-sha-kie was amazed. He did not comprehend what it could mean, but believed there certainly must be some trap set for the redskins.

Why was a wheel tepee and two men, as there appeared, coming into the Indian country?

Where were they going?

What purpose could it be that they would dare the dangers they had to face?

Other palefaces had entered the country; had gone to the great wonderland of the Big Horn Basin to seek gold; had gone to the beautiful valleys to take from the streams and valleys the yellow metal for which the palefaces would sacrifice everything—dare everything.

The Indians could account for all who had ventured into the Basin, for their scalps then hung in the warriors' lodges.

Soldiers had been sent to find them and bring them out of the Basin, but those soldiers also had died at the hands of his unconquerable braves.

The beautiful land where the Great Spirit was supposed to camp when he came to earth, was for the Indians alone. Wa-sha-kie would not allow a paleface to go there and live. It was his duty as head chief to prevent the sacrilege.

So he called his chiefs about him, and told them all that his young men, and later his scouts, had discovered.

He told his chiefs to gather their picked warriors, take their best horses to be armed with their finest weapons, and to take food for a week's trail.

He would lead them.

The wheel tepee was coming slowly on toward the Big Horn Basin.

He would send forward his best scouts to watch the tepee, and would lie in wait for it where the pale-faces would be entirely at his mercy, no matter what the tepee contained of other men and big guns.

Thus Wa-sha-kie arranged, and with five hundred warriors, the best of his village, mounted splendidly and armed with their finest weapons, all led by a score of the most famous chiefs, he started out to meet the strange lodge on wheels and its two visible guardians.

Wa-sha-kie himself selected the spot where he would strike his blow.

It was well chosen, as has been narrated, to cut off all escape and utterly annihilate the little party.

True, Wa-sha-kie expected that some of his braves must fall, but what was that little party to his numbers, even if they had big guns that could shoot many balls.

He was mystified at the fact of the bold advance into that most dangerous country of such a force, yet was apprehensive lest the two men might be a mere blind—lest the wily white man had, in the tepee, some contrivance for the Indian's destruction which the chief never yet had encountered.

Therefore, Wa-sha-kie dreaded some evil he could not see or understand.

Yet, confident in his overpowering numbers, he divided his force into four sections or bands. One section would lay in the path

of the coach; two others would be hidden on each side of the valley and the fourth was to bring up the rear.

When he showed himself, all four of the bands were to ride into view.

His plan was well executed, so he thought, and felt so sure of his victories that the war-cry was almost upon his lips, which would be the signal for the overwhelming rush, when he suddenly checked himself at what he saw.

The war cry was not uttered.

The coach, with astonishing skill and celerity, had taken up a powerful position for defense, but there were still only two palefaces visible.

Were there really no more? But Wa-sha-kie felt sure there were more, but where were they?

He was wary of a trap, for his own cunning nature caused him to look for the same cunning in his paleface foes.

But, why had not the signal war-cry been uttered?

Suddenly a murmur had run along the red-skin line, and riding into view came a black horse with a rider covered over with a sable blanket.

That was what prevented the utterance of the signal war-cry.

Wa-sha-kie would know what that portended ere he launched his warriors upon the stone fort of the corralled tepee.

CHAPTER XLI.

YELLOW HAND, THE MYSTERIOUS MEDICINE CHIEF.

EVERY eye in the Indian band was upon that black horse and its muffled rider.

They had not seen them until coming up in the rear of the circle they had been quickly given space to ride through.

All the redskins knew that a warning was to be given.

They could not recognize the one who meant to warn them, but they were sure that it was one of their famous medicine-men.

No medicine-man but a great chief would thus dare to appear before them with a warning, unless he was ready to take the consequences; failure would bring utter loss of position, if not of life.

So they beheld him ride along their line, with a sense of awe.

All were silent, and all eyes followed him as he made his way directly toward the great chief, Wa-sha-kie.

They beheld him raise his arms beneath the sable blanket and wave them, as though urging the warriors back.

At last he drew near to Wa-sha-kie, who sat with his chiefs about him, now, they having come to know what the sable visitor meant.

Wa-sha-kie's eyes were upon the man in black, and when he halted in front of the chief he said:

"Let the medicine chief uncover his head and speak."

"The medicine chief will speak words of wisdom."

"He has come to warn the great chief, Wa-sha-kie, that he is on the trail that will bring death to his braves."

With this the sable blanket was dropped back across the horse and the one beneath it was revealed.

He was naked to the waist, and from there a skirt of feathers hung nearly to his knees.

His face, body and legs were painted jet black, save in front there was a red heart pierced with arrows.

Around his head his long black hair was bound in a braid, and about his neck were necklaces of grizzly bear claws, denoting his rank as a chief of high standing.

Bands of beaten gold were upon his wrists and ankles, and his feet were bare, but the black paint covered all the flesh visible.

"It is the Yellow Hand that speaks," said Wa-sha-kie in a tone half of assent, half inquiry.

"Yes, I am the Yellow Hand," was the answer in the Indian tongue.

"He has come from among the palefaces."

"He has come from among the palefaces to warn the great chief, Wa-sha-kie, not to strike."

"Does Wa-sha-kie fear the wheel tepee and the palefaces that guard it if there are many?"

"The great chief knows no fear, and there are but two palefaces who guard the wheel tepee."

"But two?"

"The Yellow Hand has spoken."

"What have my braves to fear, then?"

"The Chief Wa-sha-kie will lose a few braves, but he will then triumph and get two scalps, a few weapons, the tepee on wheels and some horses."

"Then why does the Yellow Hand warn me of danger?"

"The Yellow Hand had a dream."

"A warrior from the Happy Hunting Grounds came down to him—and said that he must tell the Chief Wa-sha-kie not to strike at the heart of his friends, even though they were palefaces."

"The Wa-sha-kie has no paleface friends."

"Has the chief forgotten that his pony fell with him one day when he was on the war-path and hurt him badly?"

"Has he forgotten that the white Flying Man found him and treated him as a brother, fed him, dressed his wounds for him, gave him his horse and sent him on his way?"

"The Chief Wa-sha-kie remembers."

"He found one paleface brother—the Flying Man, the Buffalo Bill."

"Yes, and has Wa-sha-kie forgotten how he and four of his braves went to the fort to hold council and the bad palefaces were going to choke them to death with ropes, and would have done so had not the Lone White Hunter saved him—and the chiefs with him, and guarded them to safety?"

"Wa-sha-kie remembers."

"He has two white brothers."

"Those two white brothers of Wa-sha-kie are on the wheel tepee."

"They are going to the big valley of the Wonderland to find paleface braves who are there sick and alone and without food."

"They have brought the wheel tepee to take them away and cure their sickness."

"They do not wish to fight Wa-sha-kie and his braves; they mean no harm and are only going for their sick friends."

"Will the great Chief Wa-sha-kie forget his two white brothers now and kill them?"

"The scout from the happy hunting-grounds came to Yellow Hand in a dream and told him all, told him to warn the great Chief Wa-sha-kie and his braves."

"The Yellow Hand talks straight. Wa-sha-kie has two white brothers—they are there in the wheel-tepee."

"He will not harm them. Let my young men come."

The head chief led the way and his braves all followed, without protest or anger.

The mysterious Yellow Hand had triumphed.

CHAPTER XLII.

HOPE ON THE OVERLAND.

THE reason for the drawing off of the chief Wa-sha-kie and his braves having been made known, through the mysterious power of Yellow Hand and his identity remaining unknown, I will now return to the camps on the Overland and detail the important happenings there.

Feeling the greatest confidence in Buffalo Bill—in his capabilities to accomplish what he undertook, division-agent Luke Langdon was sustained by the hope that he would overcome all dangers and surmount all obstacles, and return with success.

Always deeply attached to his brother Leonard, Captain Langdon, as his men called him by courtesy, was deeply anxious for his rescue and to see him again.

To go himself to the rescue would have been to guarantee failure, for he was not well enough versed in plainscraft and border life to accomplish a task so difficult and so full of danger from red and white rovers.

He knew but too well all the perils that would beset Buffalo Bill, and admitted, as we have seen, that it would be almost a miracle if his pony rider chief made the trip in safety.

It would be nothing but "Buffalo Bill's luck," as his feats were called, if he was not overwhelmed by the hostiles, even if he were successful in eluding all the other difficulties—and they certainly were many.

But then, there were his brother and two others who yet remained of the original party;—they must not perish; and though it was

a hope against hope that they would live to return to civilization, the effort to save them must be made.

The hope of getting riches which his brother would bring was not the inspiring motive—far otherwise; Luke Langdon wished to have Leonard with him once more.

How gladly would he give up the fortune that was awaiting removal to have his brother's life spared!

But William Cody having undertaken the rescue of the remnant of the miners, was then an object of as deep concern as were the three to whose aid he had gone.

Daily and nightly did Captain Langdon think of his slow progress, and the manifold dangers that beset him, until he was almost tempted to send a party to rescue Buffalo Bill and leave his own brother and the others to their fate, rather than risk another valuable life in an attempt of relief and rescue that seemed simple madness when viewed calmly.

But the hope within him would then rise again, so the search-party was not sent.

It soon became known in camp that Desperate Dave was mysteriously missing.

Then came a report that a man had heard it rumored that the game the two hunters were after, when they lost their horses, was gold rather than venison.

This, however, seemed only rumor, started by some foe to injure them; but Luke Langdon thought of it over and over again. What if it were true?

Next came the fact of the five pardes being missed from the camps!

What had become of them no one knew, and making inquiries of the stage-drivers and pony-riders that went east and west, Captain Langdon learned that they had not put in an appearance at any one of the camps along the Overland, and as couriers came in from the forts with mail, and for mail, he questioned them closely, and Wild Tom and his four companions had not been heard of by them.

This fact caused real alarm, for it seemed to indicate that they had gone to shadow Buffalo Bill to the Big Horn Basin, attack him upon his return, and get the gold he was expected to bring back within the coach.

When men had not had the courage to volunteer for the desperate and lone expedition, they had at least dared to go out to reap the results of a brave man's deed, thought Luke Langdon.

After this followed the discovery of Yellow Jack's having "played possum," instead of being really ill, and having sent Dare Golden and his four followers off on an apparently wild goose chase.

So Captain Langdon could but feel anxious that Golden the gambler and his men were away, and, as they had given out, on a hunt for gold.

Yellow Jack improved slowly after the Sport's departure, and came out, as all thought, looking very wretched after his severe illness.

But he was an adept at deception, as Langdon very well knew.

Having another talk with Yellow Jack, Captain Langdon was forced to feel that the Chinaman felt most confident that Golden and his gang would not harm Buffalo Bill, and that the fellow knew more than he would even tell him.

Try as he would he could not get Yellow Jack to commit himself more than to assert that Golden had gone on the wrong trail, and that, if he came back to camp, he, the Chinaman, would take all responsibility, and that there was every prospect of the coach returning with Leonard Langdon and his treasure.

With this the division agent was compelled to be satisfied.

For all this he could but feel the greatest anxiety as to what the fate of Buffalo Bill would be, though his confidence in the Chinaman increased the more he saw of him.

CHAPTER XLIII.

ON GUARD.

THAT Buffalo Bill and California Joe were mystified at the letter from the Indian there was no doubt.

They were learning more than they could account for.

"Yer don't know, of course, Bill, who

thet writin' Ingin is, nor does I, and thet makes things more myster'us like."

"Yes, Joe, but we will push on."

"You bet we jest will! It's now or never!"

"Now my opinion is that the same man who has guarded our trail so mysteriously from the pass is, as I said, the one who writes this letter."

"Yes, but ther writin' on ther map and this hain't ther same, Buf'ler! One war printed, with a pencil on the map, while this is in writin'."

"That's so, Joseph."

"But, does Injuns draw maps?"

"I see that you do not think he is an Indian."

"I doesn't fer a certainty, Pard Cody."

"Who then, Joe?"

"Thar has been white folks livin' among the redskins, yer knows?"

"Yes, as captives."

"Thet hain't all, Buf'ler."

"Well?"

"Captives c'u'dn't git here to help us—yer know that, William!"

"True enough, Joseph."

"But others c'u'd."

"You mean renegades?"

"Jist so."

"But, would a man who was dwelling among the Indians, a renegade to his own race, aid us, Joe?"

"Maybe so."

"For what reason? Would he not rather try to get the credit of giving us over to his red brothers and thus make himself more solid?"

"He might and he mightn't."

"How do you mean?"

"S'pose he knows us?"

"Ah, yes; I see what is in your mind."

"And owes a sarvice to you, Buffalo Bill, or ter me, and I kin count many as does."

"You are right, Joe, pard. It might be a renegade white man dwelling among the Indians, for whom either you or I have done some favor, and who, knowing who we are, wishes to befriend and protect us."

"That's it."

"If he does, he's a man of influence among the Indians, or he could never have turned old Wa-sha-kie back, when his game was in his hand almost."

"Thet's so, Pard Cody."

"And his map and directions all show that he knows who we are going to the Big Horn Basin to save, so he must wish them to be rescued."

"True you says, Bill."

"I cannot account for it, unless he is some one of the original band of thirty who went with the Indians, but now useless to help his old pards and get a share of their gold, and in that case he will be the one to make a demand on us on our way back."

"I'm thinkin' you is gittin' on ther right trail, William, about this guardian of our lives."

"It really seems so, though there is no telling, and all we can do is to push on and hope that he will keep his watchful care of us over the entire trail."

"Whoever he may be I am his friend, be he redskin or renegade."

"Ditto me!"

"Well, let us push ahead and drive hard so as to reach the next camp marked on the map."

Then Buffalo Bill mounted to the box. California Joe took the horses in lead, and they continued on the perilous trail, not in the least daunted by their last almost fatal adventure.

Buffalo Bill drove at a brisk gait, and the horses were kept well at it, in spite of the roughness of the way here and there, until as night drew near, they came to the camping-place indicated on the map by their mysterious shadower.

The spot was a good one for a camp, and also for defense, a motte in a valley where there was a spring of large volume, surrounded by rocks and trees, and plenty of grass for the tired and hungry horses.

The horses were their first care, and these being stripped of their harness and staked out, wood was gathered, a fire built, and a good supper prepared for the equally tired and hungry comrades.

"We c'u'd fight here a good fight, William."

"Yes, Joe, if we had to; but I hope we won't have to."

"Ditto me; no more fight to-day. We'll give ther horses a feed for a hour or more, and then fetch 'em in among ther rocks, whar they kin git fair pickin'."

"Yes, Joe; that's the order of the night."

"And I'll be on guard ther fu'st o' ther night."

"You are looking for danger, I see, Joe."

"I is; though, as I said, I don't want no more fight just here."

"I have the same feeling, Joe—of some one on our trail, for, though Wa-sha-kie called his braves off, I feel pretty certain that some of his young bucks will follow us."

"That's jist it, Bill; I'm expectin' thet same."

"Then we'll keep a close watch, Joseph."

"We will fer a fact!"

An hour after the camp was apparently in deep repose; but, lying out in the valley was California Joe on the watch.

At midnight he arose and called Buffalo Bill.

"Hain't seen nothin', but you may, Bill."

Buffalo Bill then went on guard, while his pard slept, and slowly the hours of the night passed.

It was just as the dawn was brightening the eastern horizon, that California Joe was awakened by the low spoken words:

"Wake up, pard, for our foes are here."

CHAPTER XLIV.

A MIDNIGHT SCOUT.

THERE were enemies about, that was certain.

During the earlier watches of the night, when California Joe was on guard, not a foe could be seen or heard; but Buffalo Bill, as he said, "felt in his bones," that there was danger brewing and he prepared to meet it as best he could.

The horses had eaten their supper of grass and were lying down resting. The coach stood among the bowlders in the thicket, and there also was a safe retreat for the horses, should an attack occur.

Knowing the Indian character as they did, both Buffalo Bill and California Joe felt assured that, where the masses of the band under Wa-sha-kie would obey their chief, it would be just like a few of the hot-heads among the young bucks to slip away from the main force and come back upon their trail.

It was this band of hot-heads, whether large or small, the two pards had to fear.

When he saw that all was prepared about the camp, save running the horses in to a close corral, which could be quickly done, Buffalo Bill started off on a scout, to try and discover where their foes were and in what force, if they, indeed, were around.

He proceeded with the greatest caution, reconnoitering every foot ahead, before he passed over it, and always on the alert for the slightest sound or object.

A coyote skulking away in front of him caused him to feel that the way was clear in that direction, but it was just there he knew the Indians would be if anywhere.

So he continued on after the coyote to suddenly hear a yelp.

Instantly he halted,

"That was a yelp of pain—ah!"

As he spoke the coyote came flying by him, whining with pain as he ran!

"He ran against an Indian arrow. They are on that ridge, and I will flank it," decided Buffalo Bill, now on his keenest scent.

This he did after a long while, coming up in the rear of the ridge.

He was not long in discovering a lot of Indian ponies, feeding in a little valley; and lying flat upon the ground he crawled nearer and nearer to them.

That they would tell the story of number he knew, for there would be a pony for each brave, and he would thus get at the exact number of redskins they would have to fight.

But, the wary scout knew that the ponies had not been left unguarded, and so he must go with extreme caution.

If the ponies were tethered there, their guards were rear, but their riders were over on the ridge, while several of their scouts

undoubtedly were then out, reconnoitering his camp.

That the Indians would not attack by night Buffalo Bill well knew, but at dawn they would be ready for a rush.

Therefore, first he must find out their numbers.

Nearer and nearer he crept to the feeding ponies, and at last reached them.

He crawled about among them, and began to count.

"Forty-one," he muttered. "Not so bad, but bad enough. Now back to camp."

He glided along in the same cautious way until, suddenly, he saw a dark object right in his path lying upon the ground.

He knew that it was one of the redskin guards.

He hoped that the buck was asleep and was most anxious not to awaken him; but, the guard was not asleep, for the Indian called to him in a sleepy tone, and he answered.

His answer was to gain time, to lull suspicion until he could get nearer.

The daring scout knew that his life hung by a thread. What he did must be done with quickness and unfaltering nerve.

Answering in a muffled tone, in the Indian tongue, he drew a few steps nearer and then threw himself down upon the half-awake redskin.

He had grasped the situation, saw just how the Indian was lying, and his steel-like grip was upon his throat ere he could utter a cry of alarm.

The redskin was a wiry, powerful fellow, and Buffalo Bill felt that the struggle would be a long and hard one, the ponies would be alarmed, the other guards would run to the scene and all would be lost.

There was but one thing to do, and he must do it at once—must kill his foe.

Hardly had his hand grasped the dusky throat when his good right hand drove his knife deep into the heart of the Indian.

Instantly the bronze arms relaxed; the dread work was done.

CHAPTER XLV.

A CALL IN THE DARKNESS.

BUFFALO BILL lay a moment in silent meditation, his dead foe by his side.

The Indian was lying upon his blanket, which his slayer was glad to discover, for it told him that any stains, any signs of the struggle would not be seen on the soil; so he quickly decided upon his course.

He did not wish his midnight scout known to the Indians, or that he had killed a young brave, for that would show that the white man had struck the first blow, and the reds would thus urge the excuse of having only avenged their comrade's death.

He decided to take the body with him back to camp!

Having discovered the force of the Indians, their position and killed one of their guard, he felt that he had seen and done quite enough.

So he wrapped the blanket close about the dead form, and shouldering the body, he glided quietly away in the deep darkness.

He might be discovered; that risk he had to take; but the fates were with him, for no guard or red scout was encountered; but it was not until he had flanked the ridge and saw the glimmer of his camp-fire that he drew a sigh of relief.

To approach the camp as he had left it, he knew might be to happen upon an Indian scout. It was a heavy and ghastly burden he carried, but he would stand the strain and make a wide detour.

This he did, and at last reached camp.

Placing the body down near the camp-fire, he decided to corral the horses so as to be prepared for the rush, when it came.

California Joe heard him, but that did not disturb his slumbers, well knowing that Buffalo Bill would call him if he was wanted.

Making a circuit of the camp, when everything was in readiness, he found all quiet.

The Indians evidently lay beyond the ridge, waiting for the dawn.

Their scouts had doubtless reported to them that all was resting in the paleface camp, and just how the camp was situated.

He knew that they would move up as dawn approached, drawing as near as possible to the camp; that their ponies would be brought up as close behind them as they dared to have them, and that, just at break of day, the rush would be made, and expecting, of course, to surprise the two fast-sleeping pards.

But Buffalo Bill did not wish to kill an Indian, for that would bring the whole tribe down upon them; so he decided that the best thing to do was to let the redskins know that the two whites were on their guard and knew of their presence.

This might as the Indian band was acting against authority, cause them to draw off—as he hoped it would.

The dead Indian they would not be able to account for; his disappearance would be mysterious.

The body Buffalo Bill would carry along to dispose of as best he could upon the trail, for to bury it there would show that the brave had been killed by the pale-faces.

Having considered all things attentively, Buffalo Bill decided to call up California Joe and tell him the situation.

So Joe was aroused, as has been seen, and said at once:

"Well, let 'em know we is onter 'em, Bill."

With this, just as the gray of dawn was replacing the blackness of night, Buffalo Bill and California Joe uttered their war-cry of defiance together.

The redskins, they knew, were at that moment creeping toward the camp, and the start they got at being discovered amused Old Joe, who muttered:

"Thet scared 'em, Pard William, outen a year's growth!"

But though the reds were startled they quickly decided not to give up their prey. Discovered though they were, they would rush upon the little camp.

But, they decided, also, not make the charge on foot.

Then an answering shout of defiance was heard, and in chorus.

"Thar's plenty of 'em," muttered Joe.

"About forty, counting from their ponies."

"We'll make ther number less ef they charge and I believes they intends ter."

"Yes. Listen!"

A loud, clear voice was heard, calling out in the Indian tongue, for the ponies to be brought up.

"The chief is calling for the ponies, Joe, so they will charge on horseback."

"All right; jist as good."

An answer came from over on the ridge, and the ponies were being moved forward, for the muffled sound of their hoofs the two pards distinctly heard.

Then there was heard one loud, ringing war-cry, and after it perfect silence!

Next came a second voice, in the Indian language. It rung like a trumpet, and the two comrades caught the name of Wa-sha-kie, and distinctly heard the command for the hand to at once get to their village with all speed!

Strange the effect!

Like phantoms the braves glided away in the darkness, while the increasing gray of dawn revealed them, soon after, filing off over the ridge, their backs turned upon the little camp!

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE FLIGHT OF THE STRANGE GUARDIAN.

"THEY has gone, Buffler!"

"Yes, turned tail and vanished!"

"And no fight."

"Not a shot fired."

"Nor anybody hurt."

"There lies a redskin yonder, Joe."

"I forgetted him. But, I say, Pard Cody, what does you make of it?"

"They were called off."

"Yes, but who called 'em."

"Their chief."

"Wa-sha-kie."

"No; he went with the six hundred."

"Who then done the command?"

"I think it was the medicine-man again."

"Ah! the redman in black?"

"Just so, Joseph!"

"Now it does look like that. I tell yer, when they heerd his voice the bucks skipt like school children caught in a watermillion patch."

"They did go, that is a fact, and from what I could catch of his words he gave it to them for atsacking us, after their chief Wa-sha-kie had ordered them off."

"That's about it, William."

"And it was none other than our strange guardian, the Medicine Chief."

"You means that he found 'em at the'r deviltry and called 'em off?"

"Yes, of course. Only he could have done it."

"Whar is he then?—right near?"

"That we do not know."

"W'u'd like to ask him to breakfast."

"Yes, and while you get breakfast I'll jump on a horse and take a scout round, now it is getting light."

"Thet's ther right thing ter do, now, William."

Buffalo Bill was soon mounted and rode off toward the ridge.

He gained the height by a flank movement and as he reached the top had an extensive view of the country beyond.

There, in the distance, he saw the party of braves—not stretched out in single file as was customary, but gathered in a group and riding at a canter.

They were headed toward their village and that they were excited at their discomfiture was evident.

Intent in looking at his retreating foes, whom he saw numbered forty, as near as he could count, Buffalo Bill did not at first discern a solitary horseman behind them on the trail.

His horse was at a standstill, and the rider's back was turned toward the watching man on the ridge, for he was, apparently, studying the movements of the retreating redskins.

He was near enough for Buffalo Bill to recognize the mysterious medicine-man, whose influence had saved him the day before.

He was yet painted black, and had his sable blanket falling from his shoulders.

Upon his head he wore the eagle-feather war bonnet of a head chief, the tail of it falling upon the back of his black pony.

Buffalo Bill at once decided upon his course. He would make another attempt to speak with this renegade personage who had so wonderfully befriended him thus far upon his trail, be he red-skin or white renegade.

The band of Indians were nearing a rise over which they must soon disappear.

When they did so Cody decided to ride forward and have a talk with the Red Man in Black.

Watching the Indians Cody saw the last one disappear from view, and noted that they had glanced behind ere doing so, to discover the Black Chief still observing them; then he glided from his place of lookout, to where he had left his horse, mounted and rode over the ridge.

The Black Chief still stood as Cody had last seen him, gazing toward the spot where the young hot-headed braves had disappeared.

Instinctively he must have felt the presence of Buffalo Bill, as it was soft ground and there was no sound of hoof falls, for he turned quickly and looked behind him.

Instantly his horse bounded forward, as though the spurs had been driven deep into his flanks, and the Red Man in Black sped after the vanished braves.

Buffalo Bill called out in the Indian tongue:

"Let my red brother wait to hear the words I have to say to him!"

The address seemed to quicken his speed, and soon after he, too, disappeared at the very spot where the band had passed from sight.

Disappointed and more mystified than ever, Buffalo Bill unwillingly turned and rode back toward camp.

He could have brought the Indian's pony down with a shot—could have overtaken him, mounted as he was on a very swift horse; but he realized that the strange man, whoever he was, did not wish to speak to him, and so he determined not to urge his presence on him.

Thus far he had proven a true friend, and

Cody knew that he might still need the secret and watchful guardianship of the strange protector, for there were dangers yet to confront which might demand all their skill, courage and endurance to master.

CHAPTER XLVII.

NEARING THE END.

CALIFORNIA JOE listened with deepest interest to what Buffalo Bill had to report of what he had seen.

"He's a strange crittur, William!"

"Yes, more than strange; he is a wonder."

"Better not press him for an interduction if he don't want ter git better acquainted."

"No, I'll let him make the advances in future."

"Thet is, ef we ever see him ag'in."

"I believe we will, for I do not think he has begun so well as our guardian to desert us from this time on."

"Can't tell; we'll have to chance it on that."

Joe had everything ready for the start; so, mounting the box, Buffalo Bill drove on, pursuing the trail or course which the strange guide had directed.

The morning passed without incident, and a camp for an hour was made at noon.

Then it was to be a long drive to the allotted night encampment, and Buffalo Bill kept his team at a steady pace.

California Joe shot a fine deer, and some other game, and so they were well provisioned with fresh meats.

The country began to change, as they progressed, the scenery growing more and more grand.

There were lofty mountain ranges, woodland in abundance, fertile valleys, and the grass and wild flowers grew in luxuriance everywhere.

"What an ideal land for homes, Joe," called out Buffalo Bill, lost in admiration at the beautiful scenery.

"I hes thought thet before, when I come into this Big Horn Basin, Buf'ler. It's God's land and no mistake, and it's God's own private climate they has here, Pard William!" the old explorer averred, in deep earnestness.

"I tell you thet some day men will fight fer every inch o' land here, when settlers begins to know jist what it is," he added, prophetically.

"Yes, but it will be many a long year before the most daring of the settlers venture here; but some day the emigration will set in, and the Big Horn Basin will be known as a garden spot "of the Western Wilderness."*

California Joe smiled as he thought how Buffalo Bill was then just seeing all that he, the old wilderness tramp, had seen in his former visits to the Big Horn Basin, for in all his far and wide wanderings he had always liked to go to that wonderful region, in spite of the terrible risk he ran in doing so.

The night camp was one at which California Joe literally "burned up his nose." In fact, he began to do this long before he reached the spot designated and muttered:

No wonder ther Injuns gives it ther name they does, Bill."

Buffalo Bill laughed at his odd comrade's remarks and replied:

"Its name isn't far off the truth, Joe; that's a fact."

"I wishes ther spring was fur off; but

ther trail runs this way, Bill, and I suppose we has got ter stand it; but, does yer know I camped thar onct fer weeks?"

"You did?" in surprise.

"Yes; I war thet sick I could hardly ride, and my horse went right thar unguided, fer I didn't pull a bit. I seen him drink ther water same as ef he liked it, and it done him amazin'. A brute, Pard William, knows what are good medicine fer him, every time, so I jist went fer it, too, seein' as I was jist about played out.

"It made me kinder sea-sick at first, but I stuck to it, and you bet it brought me round all right, and I left ther springs feeling like a prize-fighter. Oh, it's big medicine, pard—you can jist bet yer 'brero on that!"

"My horse he got fat and slick, and I knows ther water saved my life. I war jokin' when I was a fault-finder at ther flavor, jist now, for I truly likes it, and you will, too, when yer gits used to it!"

"No doubt of it, Joe, for I have heard much of what the Indians think of these springs. Nature teaches them, as it does dumb animals, how to take care of themselves when sick."

"I'll wager that it was these springs which made those miners, when sick, come into this neighborhood."

"I gueses so, and our trail ought ter end in another half day of travel, as I reckons it."

"Yes, so our maps say, both the one Leonard Langdon sent to his brother and the one our mysterious guardian put in our way."

"I only hopes we will find ther poor fslows alive, and ef we does, and they is well, I guesres five of us kin git back in safety whar two of us come through all right."

"The battle is not always to the strong, Joe; but I do hope that we will find the men alive and well, and then, on our way back, I shall still trust that our good guardian and good genius, as he has proven to be, will continue to guide us out of dangers we may fail to discover. But see! there is our camp!"

CHAPTER XLVIII.

STRATEGY.

THE scene that burst upon them was a surprise to Buffalo Bill, accustomed as he was to beholding the wonders of nature in the land of marvels—the heart of the Rockies.

He gave a glance about and then looked at Joe.

The latter knew just what was coming, for he had been to that very spot before.

It was the Valley of the Sulphur Springs.

Volumes of heavily impregnated waters flowed from the spring, above which arose a dense vapor of a greenish hue.

Upon rocks, earth, trees and all had settled and crystallized the same greenish hue, while the whole air was charged with the pungent sulphurous odors.

At first, it was oppressive; then that feeling passed away and men and horses seemed eager to quench their thirst in the waters.

Adown the valley ran the green-tinted streams, as pure as purest crystal.

The animals cropped at the deeply emerald-tinted grass which grew luxuriantly there, with evident relish of the taste or flavor of the nutritious food.

The almost jaded teams were soon unharnessed and staked out, while the heavy coach was sandwiched between rocks, so as to form a good fort if attacked.

A fire was built, blankets spread, and venison steaks, broiled birds and other things furnished a good supper for the hungered men.

Game was seen in plenty, wandering about, drawn to the spring by dumb instinct of what was good for them.

Bear, elk, antelope, mountain sheep and other game in abundance, were to be had for the crack of a rifle.

But neither Buffalo Bill nor his old comrade shot to wantonly slay. They killed only when they needed food.

So they ate their good supper and enjoyed it, after which they sat down to their pipes as the darkness gathered about them.

A silence fell upon them for some time, and then it was broken by Buffalo Bill saying:

"Joe, to-morrow noon we camp at the end of our outward trail."

"Yes, Pard Bill."

"I have told you all about it, and mighty glad am I to have you along; but let me remind you now that strategy is to be used at the end."

"How so, pard?"

"You know that the letter from Leonard Langdon said that there was but one man to come?"

"Yes, I remembers that."

"He asked for a coach, provisions, bedding and arms, saying that they needed everything, and though with a fortune in gold in their hands they could not buy anything."

"Now, I have all they asked for, and more, too, but Miner Langdon expressly stipulated that only one man would be trusted; in fact, he said they would not show up if more than one came."

"Which means, what, pard?"

"It means that where their trail ends they will be hidden and can see for themselves!"

"Just what I should opine, Pard William."

"If they suspect more are along, they may be fools enough not to show themselves, though half starving, so great is the greed of men who have gold to save it. All of which being so, it is necessary for me to go on alone to their camp."

"Yes; so I should say."

"I will hitch one horse behind the coach, and drive on alone to-morrow."

"And me, Pard Cody?"

"Can hang back until I find them, when I will explain the situation to them and come for you."

"You is right, Buf'ler; that's the way to work it."

"Now, to-morrow I'll stop where the trail ends, unhitch my horses, take good care to open both doors of the coach, so any one watching can see there is no one inside, and I'll regularly go into camp, waiting for them to show up."

"If they does not?"

"I'll have to wait until night."

"And I kin come up and j'ine yer then, again, pard?"

"Not so; that is just what they may be looking for—some one to join me by night."

"That's so, I opines, Pard Cody. You've got yer wisdom hat on this trip, sure."

"And my wisdom hat says, Joe, that you must wait miles in the rear, and when they know no one has joined me, at night, they may show up the next morning."

"Just that, pard. I'll wait."

"If they do not show up by noon of the next day, then you come up, for we'll have to hunt for them, be they dead or alive, for it may be, you know, that they are not able to be out of their beds."

"You is right thar, Pard William; we may have to hunt for them. Men as has got dead oodles of gold with 'em is pretty sart'in to hide mighty close, I takes it, so the hunt for 'em may be no easy job."

"I hope we shall find them alive, at least, for the sake of Captain Luke Langdon, whose past history I know something about."

"But, Joe, now that all is understood, let us both turn in for a good night's rest, for we both need it."

They did so, and the night passed without an alarm, their sleep was "heap good."

In the morning Buffalo Bill mounted the box and drove on ahead, alone, one horse in the lead, leaving California Joe to follow later, as arranged.

They were near the end of their perilous trail, but strategy had to be used to find those they had come to succor, if, indeed, they were alive to be saved.

CHAPTER XLIX.

AT THE END OF THE RESCUE-TRAIL.

As Buffalo Bill drew nearer and nearer to the end of the long trail so beset with peril, he had to acknowledge to a feeling of nervousness creeping over him—not the feeling or dread of personal danger, but the apprehension that those he had come to save were dead—that he had arrived too late.

And if death had overtaken them, was not

*The prophecy of Buffalo Bill is just now beginning to be fulfilled, for settlers are moving into the Big Horn Basin to find homes. Irrigation is going on, and with gold, silver, copper, iron, platinum, sulphur and lead among the minerals, and with a soil that grows all kinds of fruit and vegetables, and the finest of trees, the Valley of the Big Horn is destined to become a scene of busy life before many years elapse.—THE AUTHOR.

*On account of the Sulphur Springs in that part of the Big Horn Basin, the Indians gave it the name of Stinking Water. The Stinking Water River is now called the Shoshone River, and runs through a canyon where Cody City is located, the scene of the hunt for the lost miners having been in that vicinity. It was to these Sulphur Springs that the Indians went, yearly, to cure diseases. Other mineral waters are also found there which have wonderful curative properties, but the Sulphur Springs of the Big Horn Basin are largest in the world.—THE AUTHOR.

his mission, therefore, a fruitless one? for would not the hiding-place of their gold be a dead secret?

A probable inference, and one that Buffalo Bill's near approach to the end of his pathless trail made his anxiety a keen pain, despite his firmness of nerve.

What a blow to Captain Luke, if he should return not only to report his brother dead but the fortune which had cost him his life was also lost beyond recovery!

He had come out now upon the line of travel as laid down in the map of Luke Langdon, so must soon reach the spot where it was plainly marked he was to halt, and there await developments—the appearance of Leonard Langdon, providing the rescuer was alone, as stipulated.

The fact of such a stipulation only proved how great must be the fortune at stake; the poor miners had risked too much to take any chances now.

From thirty they had dwindled down to three; and those three sick, half-starved, in daily deadly peril of being discovered by the Indians, had advanced thus far on their return homeward, and there, from sheer exhaustion, had paused to await the coming of one man!

All this strange story would not down in that one man's mind. Even in that moment of keenest anxiety, all that Leonard had said in his letter to his brother Luke was vividly recalled.

They had gone into the Big Horn Basin thirty strong, yet had seen their comrades drop off, either by an Indian arrow, disease or an accident.

The belongings of the dead had gone into the common treasury, and thus, as their numbers essened, those remaining were made the richer, for the free gold they found was abundant and their industry incessant.

At last they had as much of the yellow treasure as even the most eager of them could crave—quite as much as they could hope to get out of that wild region.

Not until then did they turn their steps homeward, and thus face the dread ordeal of that untrodden and most perilous trail.

Slowly only could they travel, hampered as they were, and as the November snows began to fly, they were forced into winter quarters at Jackson's Lake.

But, their civilized clothes now were quite gone, and they had to cover themselves with the skins of wild animals.

Game was plentiful, and fish were readily caught in lake and stream.

The winter passed at last, a terrible winter to that gold-guard, as they had then become, and their numbers had decreased steadily.

With the spring those who remained took up their tramp once more, with the few horses which yet remained to them.

But a few rounds of ammunition were left, and these were most sparingly used to secure food in the killing of game.

At last they reached the neighborhood of the spot where the rescuing stage was to meet them.

Their numbers now had dwindled to three; their horses were all dead; they had safely hidden their gold, and would there await help.

They could do no more. If help did not reach them within a month or so they must all die.

Such was the altogether sad story told by the message to Leonard Langdon, and to reach and save this remnant of a once powerful band of shoulder-to-shoulder pards Buffalo Bill had volunteered.

Some one other than Luke Langdon and himself knew where that little remnant of the gold miners was, as the letter and maps brought to the Overland camps proved.

Who was that mysterious other? Was it his own guardian of the long trail? Was it that singular unknown who had carried the map and letter to Luke Langdon?

Mystified beyond all explanation Buffalo Bill drove on until he saw about him the scene described where he must halt and await for the miners to show themselves.

Then at last he drew rein. He had reached the spot to which he had been directed; his pathless trail had been followed to the end.

He had done his part; would they keep the appointment?

That was to be seen.

CHAPTER L.

NO SIGN.

THE scene where Buffalo Bill had drawn rein was a pretty one.

It was just the spot to appoint as a rendezvous for so strange a meeting.

He had driven through a canyon into a beautiful valley, which was a couple of miles in length, and half a mile in width.

Upon each side were cliffs, the summits fringed with a thicket of pines and other trees.

In the center of the valley was a small lake, deep and clear, and about it were scattering trees.

The scene had been well drawn upon the map, and the halting place was where five trees stood in a row close to the margin of the lake, and looking as though they had been set out by the hand of man.

The grass grew all about, and firewood could be obtained by going over near the cliffs.

It was a charming camping-ground, but a dangerous one, as well, for it was so open, and from the cliffs on either side rifles could have readily thrown a bullet that it almost invited attack.

But, it was just the spot for the coach, as it had to be well reconnoitered by the suspicious men.

From the cliffs on either side every movement in the little camp could be seen.

With a glass it would not take long for a person on the watch to see if any one was concealed in the coach.

Buffalo Bill halted his teams, and, still seated upon his box, gazed fixedly at the surroundings.

He took in all with an experienced eye, then he dismounted, unhitched his teams, placed his harness where it could be quickly recovered, and staked out his horses.

His next move was to go over toward the cliffs, on the right, and gather a large armful of wood, with which he cooked his noon-day meal, hoping the smoke would also tell of his presence there, should the watchers not have seen him enter the valley.

After dinner he smoked his pipe leisurely.

Still no one appeared. Not a sound was heard; nothing was seen to indicate that an Indian was anywhere within fifty miles of the spot.

His next move was to open the coach door.

Then he rolled up the curtains, revealing that there was no one within.

Upon the top, stretched between bales of blankets, was the body of the dead Indian.

He would keep him there until night, and then his burying-place would be within the bosom of the lake.

Not a spot as he came along, had he seen where he dared to bury the dead brave, for, should some of the young bucks dare follow, they would have quickly unearthed the hidden grave of their dead comrade.

From either cliff it could be plainly seen that no one was then about the coach, save the driver, unless they were concealed in the luggage, but to prove that such was not the case Buffalo Bill took everything out of the vehicle, as though to repack it.

Slowly he did the work, and he left the things out on the ground for some time.

Still no one appeared; no signal was made from either cliff.

Night at last drew near. The luggage was placed in the coach, the horses watered and staked in fresh grazing ground, the fire rebuilt and supper prepared.

Buffalo Bill ate his meal, and when it was dark, he glided away on the back trail.

He dared not go mounted for fear he was being watched to do that very thing—to go back to a pard who was waiting.

A few miles back on the trail, he caught the glimpse of a fire off to one side.

Proceeding on to it, he was hailed by California Joe.

"You were on the watch, Joe?"

"You bet. Anything to tell, Pard William?"

"I found the spot all right, went into camp, but have seen not a sign."

"They won't show up jist yet. I opines that I had better stay here until ter-morrer night and then come fer yer camp."

"Yes; it would be better."

"I'll ride thar arter dark, fer ef they don't show up by sunset, they hain't goin' ter."

"No."

"They'll be dead and jist can't come in, yer see."

"Then we must search for them at once."

"For ther horses and ther gold, yes. Ther bodies it won't be hard to find."

"Well, I'll go back to my camp, but it's too open to please me."

"That's what they wanted it fer—ter see you and not be seen. Maybe they'll show up to-morrow."

"Well, we will wait that long; but remember our Grim Guardiansaid we were to hurry on or we would be too late."

"Yes; but give 'em until sunset ter-morrer would be my way."

Buffalo Bill left California Joe in his lone camp and returned to the rendezvous.

All was as he had left it, and he quietly spread his blankets under one of the trees and turned in for the night.

CHAPTER LI.

WAITING IN VAIN.

THE morning dawned, and nothing save the howling of coyotes had disturbed the night's repose.

But a couple of hours after he had turned in Buffalo Bill awoke "by appointment with himself," as he expressed it.

He went to a blanket already prepared, and then climbing to the top of the coach took from it the body of the dead Indian.

It was already enveloped in a blanket, but laying it upon the other, Buffalo Bill went from spot to spot, gathering stones on the shore of the lake. These stones he placed in a row on each side of the body.

Then he folded the blanket over and carefully sewed it, with a harness needle, from top to foot.

Throwing off his nether garments, he led up one of his horses, and with a powerful effort raised the heavy burden, of body and rocks, and placed it across the animal's back.

Upon this horse he then sprung, and rode into the lake.

When the horse began to just lose his footing from the depth of the water, the body was toppled over and instantly sunk from sight in the depths of the lake.

"A strange burial that, even for an Indian; but I guess he'll rest as well as though he were under the ground, with a horse-tail for a head-piece."

"It will be a long while before the blankets give way, and then his bones will never rise."

"Poor fellow, some Indian mother will mourn her lost son, some redskin girl will look in vain for his return, and a father perhaps will grieve that his boy brave did not live to carry out the promises of his youth."

"But, so it goes with paleface and redskin, and cruel war makes it necessary."

"I am sorry I had to kill him, but it was his life or mine."

Riding back to the shore, Buffalo Bill put the horse out again and returned to his blankets, his thoughts still upon the dead redskin.

But he was too well accustomed to such scenes to long be awake, and quickly was asleep, to rest undisturbed until dawn, though the disappointed coyotes, losing their anticipated feast, made night hideous with their howls of discontent.

The morning dawned bright and beautiful. The fall of the year was not far distant, and all Nature was at its best.

Cooking his breakfast, Buffalo Bill ate it leisurely, still glancing about for some sign of life that would show him that those he had risked so much to rescue still lived.

But no sign appeared. Slowly the day dragged away until dinner time.

After the meal Buffalo Bill took his rifle and went off in search of game.

It was not long before he brought down a mountain sheep, young and tender, and then several grouse.

Returning to camp he threw his fishing line into the pellucid waters and quickly caught a mess of deep-water trout for supper and breakfast.

"I will have a feast for old Joe to night," he muttered, as he began to prepare his game.

But Buffalo Bill was greatly worried at receiving no sign from the miners. More and

more he felt that they were dead, or perhaps too helpless from starvation or illness to leave their hidden camp.

"If the sun goes down with no sign of them, then I will conclude that we must begin a search to-morrow, Joe and I."

"He will be in camp soon after nightfall, for I will go out to meet him, and bright and early we must get to work."

"The horses have had a couple of days of good rest and the best of grass, so they will be all right for any work."

Until the sun went down beyond the cliffs across the lake, Buffalo Bill kept watch, and a look of sadness stole over his fine face as the darkness began to creep around him and not a sound, or a sight, or a signal from the lost miners.

He threw some wood upon the fire, got all ready to cook supper, and then slipped out of camp to go after California Joe.

He found his old comrade waiting for him beyond the entrance to the valley.

"Well, Buf'ler?"

"I'm after you, Joe."

"No sign of 'em?"

"Nothing whatever."

"Dead, I guesses."

"It looks that way, or else that they are too used up to leave their camp."

"May be that."

"I've got a good supper for us ready to be cooked at camp."

"Good. I didn't eat none, preferrin' ter wait."

"Well, you follow me into camp. I'll take a couple of your horses, and you come on with the others and stake them out."

"Keep out of the firelight until I get supper; when we'll put out the blaze and eat, for the miners may appear even up to the last minute."

"That's so, and I goes by your say."

Half an hour later, Buffalo Bill and California Joe sat in the semi-darkness enjoying a good supper.

They had their pipes, afterward, and talked matters over, and then went to their blankets.

Buffalo Bill had more than filled his part of the contract; he had waited the fullest time; no miners had appeared, and upon the morrow the search for them would begin.

CHAPTER LII.

THE MIDNIGHT VISITOR.

WHETHER it was their late and hearty supper, or the howling of the coyotes that drove sleep away, it is certain that the two pards were very restless during the night.

They had laid down to rest, apart from each other, fully a hundred feet, not wishing, should any miner come to the camp, for him to see more than the one expected person.

Up to the last they both hoped even against hope that some one of the sought for men would appear.

During the night the coyotes, sniffing about camp, had uttered a startled yelp and scattered in fear.

Buffalo Bill sat up and was at once on the alert.

After a long wait, nothing to disturb him occurred further, so he lay down again.

California Joe had also been aroused from his half-awake condition by the scattering coyotes, but, supposing that it was his pard who had frightened them, he tried to sleep once more.

At last the morning dawned, neither Buffalo Bill or Joe having enjoyed their night of restless slumber.

When dawn was growing brighter, they rose from their blankets.

"I guess it's no use fer me ter hide longer, pard Bill."

"No, Joe. Come right out and we'll get to work. You get breakfast and I'll see to the horses."

"All right; but I'll jist dip up a bucket o' water a leetle spell away frum whar you buried ther red, in ther drink."

"It may be thet Injun down beneath them calm waters, but I didn't rest at all well last night."

"Nor did I."

"Yas, I seen yer up, lookin' round, but I were sleepy jist then and didn't call to yer."

"Yes, I did sit up once, for the coyotes scampered off one time, scared at something, I could not tell what."

"I seen 'em, and I seen you arterward when yer went scoutin' round the camp."

"You saw me, Joe, scouting around last night?" asked Buffalo Bill quickly.

"Yes; in course."

"Joe, I did not leave my blankets after I laid down, though I did sit up for a while when I heard the coyotes."

"Pard Bill, does you walk in your sleep?"

"Not to my knowledge, Joe."

"I tell you I seen yer."

"You were dreaming."

"No, I wasn't; nary a dream."

"Then I was walking in my sleep."

"Bill!"

"Yes, Joe."

"Maybe it wasn't you."

"Where did you see any one?"

"Right yonder by the fire."

"Tell me just what you saw, or dreamed, Joe."

"I saw a form coming from right whar you slept, and it went over by the fire and stooped down; then I seen it kinder fade away, for I were drowsy jist then."

"You did not see me, Joe, for I did not leave my blankets; to that I can swear."

"Then it were ther dead Injun prowlin' 'round."

"Not he, for he's at the bottom of the lake, anchored for keeps."

"I mean his ghost."

"I don't believe in ghosts, Joe. But you say he halted at the fire?"

"About thar."

"Let us go and look for a trail."

It was now light enough to begin to see objects fairly well, and the two men walked quickly over to the fire, a few live coals being still visible.

"See there, Joe!" and Cody pointed to something near the fire—an arrow sticking in the ground!

More, it was stuck through the handle of the coffee-pot, so it would not miss being found.

As Buffalo Bill had spoken to Joe, and pointed out the arrow, he stepped quickly forward, and tearing the arrow from the ground he took from around it a slip of paper.

Unfolding it he read:

"Too late!

"They are dead, those you came to rescue."

"Follow the map and directions below and you will discover the proof of what I say."

The words were in the same hand as before, and below were the map and directions.

"Joe, we are too late to rescue them."

"And ther gold?"

"We will soon know."

CHAPTER LIII.

TOO LATE.

"BILL, I is dead stuck on thet feller."

"Who, Joe?"

"Ther one who put this here."

"You don't know him, Joe."

"I know enough ter like him, Buf'ler."

"He has certainly served us well."

"Yes, I should say he had."

"And helps us out now that we have reached the end of our journey."

"Thet hain't all, Bill."

"He hev done thet and more."

"What more?"

"You holds a letter and a map thar, in yer hand?"

"Yes."

"And thar lies a arrer at yer feet?"

"Yes."

"And ther paper were wrapped around it?"

"True."

"An' it were stuck through ther handle o' ther coffee-pot jist whar you'd find it?"

"That's so."

"Now, what makes me dead gone on thet crittur is thet he come right here inter this camp, walked atween you an' me, puts ther arrer here and skips off, and nuther of us got a grip on him."

"That is so."

"I'm ther most ter blame."

"Why so?"

"I seen him."

"You thought it was me."

"I hed no right ter think. I should have got up an' seen for myself."

"And I, Joe, woke up when the coyotes scattered, and should have discovered the reason."

"Well, we both was caught napping, though neither of us slept well. Now read thet ag'in."

Buffalo Bill did so, and there saw, written on the back of the map:

"There is no need to hide California Joe's presence longer, so work together."

"Why, Joe, he knows you!"

"So it do seem, William."

"Well, he has kept a very close eye upon us, ever since we left the camps, and for our good."

"I am more than ever convinced that he is the one of the three miners who was able to travel, and so went after help. He did not, for some reason, wish to make himself known, so fastened the letter and map upon Captain Langdon's door."

"Yes, Bill, but how is he a pard o' ther Injuns, for they'd hev helped him out with with his gold, and yer knows he kept 'em off of us?"

"That is so. The mystery but deepens the more we seem to get into it."

"He knows you and he knows me. He knows why yer come, and now he tells yer thet we is too late. He says ter go on and foller his map and git proof."

"And we will proceed to business at once."

"You bet, pard; business it is now; but thet was him I seen, and he are ther fu'st man ever come inter camp an' I not know it, and ther same with you."

"Yes, he is a cunning one—a feather-foot who makes no noise and leaves no trail."

"You bet he be; and now I kin jist picture him over yonder on ther cliff a-laughin' and a-laughin' at ther way he hev got ther joke on us."

"Well, Joe, we can now but follow his directions."

"True fer you, Bill, and I'll be with yer; but ther doin's o' thet man makes me believe more and more in ghosts."

Buffalo Bill laughed, and putting the map in his pocket he went off and changed the grazing ground of the horses, after leading them to the lake to water.

Joe had built a fire and had breakfast on when his pard came back.

Breakfast over, they harnessed up, got all ready, and, mounting the box once more, Buffalo Bill drove away from the camp, Joe following with the led horses.

Guided by the directions and the map, he passed on out of the valley into another one, heavily timbered, and after several miles came to a stream.

The map trail led across this, though it was rough driving beyond, and it seemed that they were to be brought to a halt up against a high cliff.

But a few rods on they beheld a narrow canyon opening before them, and entering this, several hundred yards from where it began, they came suddenly upon a little cabin standing in the midst of a small pine thicket.

The cabin was small, built of pine logs; a spring was near the door; it certainly was a most secure hiding-place.

The door was closed with a wooden latch, and after knocking and receiving no answer, Buffalo Bill entered.

"We are too late, Joe," he said, pointing to three dead bodies that lay in the little cabin.

CHAPTER LIV.

A STRANGE REVELATION.

FOR some moments did Buffalo Bill and California Joe stand gazing upon the scene they had so suddenly come upon.

There was the little cabin, fifteen by ten feet, built of logs and chinked in by clay.

A fireplace was in one end also a rude table of hewn logs, benches and a cupboard; in the other end were half a dozen bunks, with bear robes and tattered blankets.

In the cupboard was a most painfully scant supply of provisions, while an elk, lately slain and dressed, hung up in a tree outside.

Firewood was piled up outside, but, altogether, the place was most forlorn.

On a rack were a number of rifles, shot-

guns and revolvers, doubtless the weapons of the dead band that had started with high hope of finding fortunes in the Big Horn Basin.

The two rescuers, seeing that the men were dead, surveyed the cabin and surroundings. They beheld in the canyon the scattered bones of half a dozen horses, and the saddles and bridles hung up on the side of the cabin.

There were the bones, also, of game which the men had slain, and a perfect troop of coyotes dashed out of the canyon, all going one way, showing that there was no exit further up.

A few cooking utensils were there, and a well-worn path to the spring and down the canyon.

Down the latter, a few rods, were four graves, where rested the bodies of the party who had sought that lone hiding-place when their horses broke down and they could go no further.

Up against the cabin were picks, shovels and spades, the tools of the men, and all well worn from use, while within on the wall-peg were saws and hatchets.

Having seen all that there was about the dreary spot, Buffalo Bill and California Joe turned their eyes upon the dead lying there within the cabin.

Two of them were in their bunks and had been dead twenty-four hours or more.

The third man lay upon the floor of the cabin. He seemed to have risen from a bench and then had fallen. A cocked revolver was in his hand. Had he been surprised and risen to give battle? That was what both Bill and Joe decided.

The three men were wretchedly clothed. They wore skin moccasins, ragged pants and shirts, while their hats were made of coyote skins.

Each wore a knife in his belt, but their revolvers were useless for the want of ammunition, save the one weapon held in the grip of the dead man lying upon the dirt floor.

That weapon was loaded, save two barrels, and another revolver in his belt had every charge in it.

This seemed strange; but, strangest of all, was the discovery made by Buffalo Bill.

The two men in the bunks seemed to have died a natural death, while the one prostrate on the floor had a bullet wound in the center of his forehead!

The blood had thickened about it, but a stream had stained the floor, and the man showed, to the experienced eyes of Buffalo Bill and California Joe that he had not been dead as long as the others, by hours.

"Well, Joe, what do you make of it all?"

"Them two died natural and this one was kilt."

"Sure."

"He didn't kill hisself."

"That is certain to me as to you, though some others might think he gave up all hope and took his own life."

"Twasn't so."

"No, for he had some provisions left and the elk out there. His weapons are loaded, and he knew help had been sent for."

"Then there is no powder burn on his face."

"The shot was not fired by his own hand, even by accident."

"That are certain, and jest as sart'in that some one killed him."

"That some one opened the door, surprised him, he fired two shots, and see, there they are in the logs, and he fell dead."

"And the one who kilt him got the gold, I opines."

"I don't know about that. But see! There are some papers which he must have been looking over when killed."

"Look at 'em and read 'em, Bill."

"I will," and then he added:

"We will stay here for some time, I take it, Joe, so let us first look to our cattle," and the two went to where they had left the coach and teams and the led horses.

CHAPTER LV.

THE PAPERS.

A good feeding-ground was found not far from the cabin in the canyon, and the spring furnished a tiny stream of water which the pards dammed up and made into a pond.

The horses cared for, and their camp settled, for they did not care to stay in the cabin, they returned to see about the dead.

That the bodies should be first looked to both felt; afterward they could go over the papers and learn the whole sad story—the only source of information now that the lips of those they came to save were forever sealed and silent.

Whatever the mystery before, it was but increased by the finding of the dead.

The two pards had half feared that; but they had not expected to find one of the three miners slain, and by some mysterious foe.

Had it been an Indian's deed, he would have scalped his victim and then have burned the cabin with the dead in it.

No; the murder—for such it evidently was—must have been the work of a white man.

Going back into the cabin the man who lay upon the floor, with the bullet wound in his forehead, was first prepared for burial.

He was a large strong man, with long, coarse hair, and full beard, unkempt and uncared for, and a face that really had the look of one who would commit any crime. The two pards looked upon it with not a show of sympathy, or seeming to feel the least regret.

The fellow had a seal ring upon his finger, with an anchor cut into the stone, and the initials D. D. were pricked into the arm with India ink, one on each side of an anchor.

This, the two decided, was a proof of his having been a sailor at some time of his life.

Nothing was found upon his body of value—not a slip of paper even to give a clue to his identity.

The form was wrapped in a blanket and laid on one side of the cabin to await burial; Buffalo Bill taking off the seal ring as possibly a means of identification some day.

The other two bodies were then taken from their bunks.

One was a man of thirty, whose face betokened grit and determination. His hair and beard also, were long and uncared for, and nothing was found upon the body by which he could be identified.

He, too, was wrapped in a blanket and placed by the side of the other.

The third was a person of different character and quality from the others; a glance revealed that much.

The moment that Buffalo Bill looked into the face he said: "This is Leonard Langdon, the brother of Captain Luke."

"He looks it, Pard William," assented old Joe.

His hair and beard were long, but they had been well cared for. He was poorly dressed, but what he wore was tidy.

Buffalo Bill, finding a ring upon his left small finger, drew it off.

Then he cut off a lock of the dead miner's long hair and put it with the ring.

The hands, though browned, and hardened, were small and shapely.

About his waist was a buckskin belt, broad and heavy.

This was unbuckled and removed. It was found to contain gold coin and paper money, amounting to a couple of thousand dollars.

There was, also, in the belt several trinkets—all of which Buffalo Bill put carefully away.

The dead wore an undershirt of buckskin, which, it was found, had two inside pockets.

From one of these Buffalo Bill took a leather wallet containing stained and time-worn papers; from the other pocket were lifted some legal papers and a deed, with an official envelope addressed to:

"LEONARD LANGDON, ESQ.,

"NEW YORK HOTEL,

"BROADWAY.

"New York City."

The postmark and date on this were strangely legible.

Within the envelope were several other documents, one of which proved to be a will of recent date, for it bore the heading:

"BIG HORN BASIN."

The date was but five months before.

"It is Leonard Langdon's will, signed, and witnessed by three names—those of his comrades," decided Buffalo Bill.

"Yes, plenty of papers, Bill, and I hopes they may pan out well for your friend, ther cap'n," remarked California Joe.

"Well, I hope so, too, Joe. If a man

makes a will, he must have something to leave, and I notice he makes the captain his heir, though to what, I have not yet read. But, Joe—"

"Yes, Pard Bill."

"We must make a coffin for Leonard Langdon, and bury him apart from the others, for something might turn up, some day, that would cause his body to be sent after and removed."

"That's so. But, I say, what troubles me is who kilt ther man as was shot, and what did t'other two die of, and why wasn't Leonard, here, robbed if it was a white man who did the killing?"

"That we will have to find out," was the quiet reply. "It will all be made plain, some day, I have no doubt."

"I hopes it will be, Pard William, fer it's all a queer mix, now."

CHAPTER LVI.

A VALUABLE FIND.

WITH saw and hatchet a rude coffin was made, and the body of Leonard Langdon was placed in it, the other two men being wrapped in blankets.

Two graves were dug, one apart from the other and larger, and into the latter the two comrades of Langdon were placed.

The smaller grave was for Leonard Langdon's remains, and upon a tree at its head Buffalo Bill cut his name and the date of their arrival at the cabin, while Joe filled in the dirt and shaped up the mounds.

It was then nightfall, and, quite tired out from their hard work, the two comrades had their supper and lay down to rest, spreading their blankets in the canyon below, where their horses were, so that no one could approach the cabin without arousing them.

They had little to say to each other and were soon fast asleep.

Early dawn found them up and at work. Joe cooked their breakfast, after making the fire, while Buffalo Bill took care of the horses.

The meal over Buffalo Bill said:

"Now, Joe, we can take our time to search the cabin and canyon thoroughly; but, first, let us look over those papers, for they may give us a clue to where the miners cached their gold. I would greatly regret not to be able to take that back to Captain Langdon."

"Yes, we must find it ef it is a possible thing. Maybe ther papers will put us on ther trail."

"I hope so, so come to the cabin."

They proceeded to the cabin and first began on the papers which had been found on the table in the cabin, and which were being looked over, beyond a doubt, by the last of the trio of miners when he was shot.

Why they had not been robbed by the man who fired the fatal bullet neither Buffalo Bill nor California Joe could understand.

"Maybe our coming drew him off afore he c'u'd rob 'em, Bill?" suggested Joe.

"That could not have been, Joe, for the body was entirely cold, and the blood from the wound was dry when we first came."

"So it were."

"It had made quite a pool on the floor, you remember—there is the stain in the dirt yet, and the fact that it was dry, proves that the man had been killed at least over a dozen hours."

"It does, fer a fact, Pard William."

"He was shot; the others died a natural death; that is what I do not understand."

"Me too."

"The man who killed him committed no robbery, closed the door and left."

"An Indian did not do it, and if it was a white man, as it must have been, then he fired that shot in self-defense or to avenge some wrong, and was too honorable to take what did not belong to him."

"It looks that way, and there do be sich men."

"You are just that kind yourself, Joe."

"I hopes so, as you is, too; but they don't come our way often."

Buffalo Bill was now looking over the papers picked up from the table.

The very first one he scanned was a list of names.

"These are the men who formed the expedition, and their place of residence is given, and how they died, and where."

"Yes, the only three not marked 'Dead,'"

are those we found here, but that same dread word can be written after their names, now.

"Why see here, Joel Here is the very amount of gold each one had written after each name, and Leonard Langdon had by far more than any of the others.

"He was the captain, too, and from the sums here given—that is, taking the weight of the gold each man possessed as his share, and estimating the value in coin, as this statement does, it shows that Daniel Darley had a small fortune, though he really was assigned the least of all."

"That's ther feller as was shot, fer none others had ther name begin with two D's."

"A very good guess. He had D. D. in his ring and also pricked into his arm, so he was Daniel Darley, Joe."

"Sure; the feller with the ugly mug was him."

"And his gold pile is estimated at fifteen thousand, the lowest of all, while the sums opposite the other names range from eighteen to thirty-five thousand, Leonard Langdon having sixty-five thousand to his credit.

"Why, Joe, that was a big find for them, too big to be left here for somebody else to appropriate. We must find the *cache* without fail, for a number of people, their kindred, can be made happy by it—but, see here," and Buffalo Bill continued, after reading further:

"Why, this paper is signed by the men in full, and gives the gold of each one who dies to the ones who survive, so that, had the three men come through all right they would have been very rich.

"And who is ther heir, now? asked California Joe abruptly.

CHAPTER LVII.

JOE SURPRISES BUFFALO BILL.

THE document read over by Buffalo Bill was a valuable one, indeed, for it would give to the survivors or survivor the gold of all the others.

There was the list and opposite to each name had been written one of the following notices of what his fate had been—opposite the names of all save the three found in the cabin:

"Dead. Shot as a mutineer by decision of band."

"Killed by Indians."

There were eight names inscribed killed by Indians.

Then followed:

"Fell from cliff and was killed."

"Attacked Captain Langdon and was shot by him."

"Died of fever."

Two had thus lost their lives.

After no less than seven names was written:

"Cause of death unknown—supposed to have been killed by Indians."

Opposite several names stood the record:

"Died from poison."

Thus was the fate of each man accounted for in that valuable but most melancholy record, which Buffalo Bill read twice over while California Joe listened with the deepest attention to at last remark:

"Pard Cody, I has got a mean way of thinking of some folks."

"Well, Joe?"

"Thar is a number that died from poison?"

"Yes, Joe, five."

"Thar is three fell from cliffs?"

"Yes."

"That makes eight."

"It does."

"How many came of death unknown?"

"Seven."

"That foots up fifteen."

"Yes!"

"Two died of fever."

"Yes."

"That makes seventeen."

"Very true."

"One was executed."

"One was shot by Captain Langdon, and that makes nineteen."

"Well?"

"And seven kilt by Injuns makes twenty-six."

"Very true."

"One got crushed by rock falling from a cliff."

"Twenty-seven, Joe."

"And three we found here."

"Made up the thirty."

"Yes; but what do you make out of that?"

"I makes out that too many died by poison, too many fell from cliffs, too many died without nobody knowin' how it happened, and one from a rock falling on him."

"I don't just see the trail you are following, Joe."

"No, yer is too good to suspect yer feller-men of deviltry; but I says, says I, thet thet paper, drawed up as it are, was a premium on murder; and more, it tempted one or more men ter kill ther other fellers."

"But, Joe—"

"Now, I hain't done yet. One of the party all wanted shot, and he were shot, and I opines he war caught in some deviltry."

"Then another tried ter kill Cap'n Langdon, but got kilt."

"Yes."

"Some died o' fever, and maybe they did, so they passed in their chips O. K., but ther others, say I, were dealt with foul."

"It were easy ter throw a pard from a cliff, ter drop a rock on another pard's head, ter poison more of 'em, ter shoot more of 'em from ambush and let it be thought Injuns did it, and thus get rid of a lot, while, let me tell you right here, and no man will see it more plainer than you kin, knowin' redskins as you does, thet not one o' them men was kilt by a Injun."

"What do you mean, Joe, for I confess I am away off?"

"I means, if Injuns had kilt one, they'd hev kilt all."

"Ah! now I catch on to your meaning, Joe. If Indians had found mining going on here, they would have hunted every one of the band down."

"Jist so, and Injuns never found 'em. The reds don't come up here, much, only when they visits them high-smellin' Springs, and then they gits out soon as they has hed their spree o' drinkin' ther water."

"Injuns didn't know them miners was here, or they would hev wiped 'em off ther earth; so I tells you ag'in, one of ther fellers of the band of thirty did all ther killin', fer he wanted all ther gold."

"Joe, I half believe you are right, now I look at it all from your standpoint. Yes, I very much fear such was the case," and Buffalo Bill seemed deeply moved at the thought of what a man would do to get gold.

CHAPTER LVIII.

THE SECRET UNTOLD.

BUT, California Joe had not yet had all his say, and, after allowing Buffalo Bill to ponder on the subject awhile, he added:

"I has more ter spring upon yer, Pard William."

"Go ahead, Joe; you have the floor."

"Yer remember how it were reported thet a young lieutenant and a few sogers war kilt here?"

"Yes; I know of the Lost Squad."

"Their takin' off was laid ter Injuns."

"That, of course, was the supposition. Who else could have overcome the detachment?"

"Now, the lieutenant was sent up here ter look fer these same miners, as their friends in ther East writ out to ther colonel at ther fort, askin' him ter find 'em," Joe went on seriously as if under deep feeling, without noticing his comrade's query:

"Yes; that was the object of their being sent into the Basin."

"I know'd ther' war miners up in ther Basin, but I thought ther' was more than ther' was of 'em. I hed been in ther Basin as you knows, but I had come alone; so I tells ther colonel I'd try and find ther lieutenant and his men."

"Well, Pard Cody, I expected ter find thet they hed been kilt. I know'd I c'u'd

come alone whar an army c'u'dn't get through, an' I did, an' as you knows, I found ther lieutenant and his men—found 'em dead, every one of them."

"I went back and reported to the colonel at ther fort that they was all gone up, but that Injuns hedn't kilt 'em. I tole him it looked to me as if they hed all been p'izen-ed."

"Poisoned? You surprise me, Joe!"

"Thet same. Thar they lay in camp, and I got thar mighty soon arter the deed were done, fer they hed not been touched by coyotes."

"Thar they was stretched out in the'r blankets, an' thar laid out the'r horses, too, all dead—every one ov 'em."

"I gathered up ther weepens and what they hed about 'em, hid 'em in a *cache*, and thar we'll find 'em fer it hain't five mile from here."

"Now, arter considerin' ther cause o' death ov these miners—arter knowin' whar they has been hid, and seein' whar ther sogers died, and how they died, I knows thet ther lieutenant found ther lost party o' Gold Hunters."

"Ther man as did ther killin' fer his comrades here, didn't intend ter let ther lieutenant go back and report he had found ther miners and they had lots of gold, and a party must be sent arter them an' ther treasure; oh no! He would trust to gettin' out with thet gold himself, and gittin' it all too, fer himself, and you bet he jist p'izen-ed ther food of them sogers, and they died thet first night in camp arter leavin' ther miners, and he folloed and give ther horses a dose, too, I'll bet high on that same fer a dead sure fact."

"I take it thet one o' ther men found here were his pard in ther game, and, detarmined ter play a lone hand, he played ther same p'izen dodge on thet pard an' ther cap'n, and so he war then left alone in his glory."

"But he could never have gotten out alone with his gold, Joe; he must have known that."

"Bill, it may be thet he were left alone here by ther Injuns, as he war their friend; if not, he could easy turn renegade, and then git his gold by little bits ter somewhar near ther Overland Trail."

"Bill, thet man with the ugly mug were ther head devil, and he done it all."

"You make a very strong case against him, Joe, and by talking it over we may get at the facts fully."

"But now to find this treasure, if it is not hidden beyond finding."

Buffalo Bill began to look over the other papers, and at last found a map upon which a bottle of ink appeared to have been overturned, either by accident or purposely.

The result was that the drawing was blotted out, except in one place where the words were made out:

"Gold *cached* just here."

Below on the map some directions had also been destroyed by the ink, but the following was finally made out:

"One hundred paces from the pine, on map marked 'starting point,' turn due east and step off sixty paces, and you come to the opening in the rocks where the gold—"

The ink blot here destroyed the rest of the directions.

Buffalo Bill ceased reading and looked at his comrade, who said:

"I guesses we kin find it, Pard William."

"Very doubtful, Joseph, for we do not know whether it is within fifty miles of here

or fifty rods. The treasure of the miners of the Lost Cabin will never be found by these directions, I am convinced; but we will make the search, all the same. If it takes a month, we must go over all this region carefully."

"Just so, William—just so; but it won't take a month; bet yer sombrero on that."

And old Joe's manner expressed a confidence which Buffalo Bill did not quite comprehend.

CHAPTER LIX.

THE DEADLY HAND.

THE startling theory advanced by California Joe that one of the party of thirty had been the one to sacrifice his comrades for his

own game, began to gain credence with Buffalo Bill; the more he pondered over it the more did he realize its probability.

He had become convinced that the Indians had not known of the existence of the gold hunters in the Big Horn Basin, or, if they did know, the hunters were protected by some "black sheep" in the Indian council, who could have been nothing else than a renegade white man.

That the lieutenant and his men had died the mysterious death they did, seemed proof that this same deadly, cruel hand had been at work on the hunters, also.

As no other papers were found to throw further light upon the tragic affair, Buffalo Bill and California Joe proceeded to make a thorough search of the cabin.

Their desire was to find out how long it had been used by the miners, and they decided, from all signs by which they could judge, that it had been occupied the winter before—the three men found there dead and those who slept in the graves outside, having been the ones to come there.

But, another discovery was made, and one of considerable value.

In Leonard Langdon's bunk was found a pair of leather saddle bags, which contained half a dozen buckskin bags filled with bits of gold, anywhere from the size of a pea to pieces that weighed two ounces or more.

Upon the bags were the names of the three men found dead in the cabin, two belonging to each man. The value, all told, was fully ten thousand dollars.

This appeared to prove that the chief bulk of the treasure had been hidden away, while the amount found in the bunk was being carried along by the miners for their use until they could return with a force and rescue the balance, which they had cached.

"Well, Joe, we don't go back empty handed to Captain Langdon, whether or no we find the cache."

"If we gits back at all, William."

"What, you getting blue, old pard?"

"Oh, no, only thinking."

"Then think this out while your thinker is at work: I have discovered that the provisions these men had are of Government supply and fairly fresh, and with the fort stamp upon them. This proves, Joseph, that you were right in saying the lieutenant and his men found the miners, for they shared their supplies with them. See, here is a silk handkerchief, and embroidered on it are the initials 'F. B.'"

"Yes, and it was Lieutenant Fred Bailey, whose body I found with his men."

"Then that is the best of evidence that the officer found the miners—poor fellow."

"So says I, William, but what are this stuck up here?" And California Joe drew out of a hiding-place among the logs a bottle bearing the label: "Morphia—1 oz."

"That settles it, Joe. The man who brought that into camp did the work of poisoning his comrades and the soldiers."

"You has struck it right, and here is more truck," and Joe drew from its hiding-place a small morocco case of medicines and surgical instruments combined, and upon which was the gilt lettering:

"DR. DANIEL DARLEY."

"Asst. Surgeon U. S. Navy."

"Joe."

"Ay, ay, pard!"

"The man who was shot we decided was a sailor."

"Yes, it seemed so, fer he had on an anchor seal ring, and his initials D. D. and an anchor pricked in his arm. That, Pard William, was evidence enough fer any court, I opines."

"Well, this 'D. D.' is down on the list of gold hunters as doctor, and this case of medicines and instruments verifies it."

"He really was a doctor, therefore he understood poisons and doubtless was fired out of the navy for some good reason and came to the Wild West to make his fortune in any way that he could. That all, now, seems clear enough to me, so I think we are getting down to bed rock in our discoveries, Joe."

"Yes, but granted that he kilt his two last pards with p'izen, Bill, who kilt him?"

"Ah, you have me there, Joe; but we must find out even that, if it can be done. We'll continue our search, for so far all has panned out unexpectedly well, in getting at facts."

But, though the very closest search was prosecuted, nothing more of importance was revealed or indicated; and as night was coming on, the two pards had supper and again had sought their blankets, determined to make yet further investigations upon the morrow of the work of the deadly hand of Daniel Darley.

CHAPTER LX.

LINK BY LINK.

To two men, such as were Buffalo Bill and California Joe, "reading signs" was comparatively easy work.

The true borderman must be a natural detective, as well as being versed in all kinds of plaincraft and signs lore.

He must get at the motive of paleface and Indian in all they did.

Having made valuable discoveries in the cabin, which were strong links in the chain of evidence against Doctor Daniel Darley, they continued, the next morning, to hunt for signs, and were not long in finding them.

They knew that the miners had lost their last horse, and yet iron-shod tracks were found in the grazing ground beyond the canyon meadows!

This showed that the soldiers had staked their horses there by a little pond formed by the waters of the spring flowing from the canyon.

The tracks were old, but had been made since the snow had melted.

This circumstance, with the finding of the food in the cabin, was proof sufficient that the soldiers had been there and camped, for some days at least, near the miners.

"We must take their trail from here, Joe. That ought not to be difficult. We know which way they would go, and you know where you found them; therefore let me see if I can trail them to their last camp," said Buffalo Bill.

On this new quest he started, and slowly but surely he took up the cold trail, but had sign enough to feel sure the doomed soldiers had taken.

California Joe followed slowly leading his own and Cody's horses but making no comment.

"Well, Pard Cody, you is a dandy! he called out at last, as Buffalo Bill halted by a group of graves, while, not far away, were the cleanly picked bones of the horses of the troopers.

"They are here."

"Yes, here's whar I planted 'em, and it was hard work, I admits that."

"Now to the cache."

"Yes, we'll go thar, and make ther horses tote back ther saddles and things if they hav'n't been disturbed."

Joe led the way to where he had hidden the soldiers' equipments, and now drew them out of a little cave among the rocks. They had been undisturbed.

They were packed upon the two horses, which were then led the ten miles back to the cabin, Buffalo Bill saying:

"They will show what the fate of the lieutenant and men were, and, if I ever get back, I'll take them up to the fort myself, Joe."

"Yes, and you kin tell the hull story, and it's a ugly one too, Pard Cody."

"Indeed it is."

Arriving at the cabin again, there was no sign that any one had been there during their absence.

The saddles and other equipments, with the things found in the cabin to prove that the soldiers had been there and shared their food with the gold hunters, were all stowed in the coach.

Thus had passed another day at the lost cabin of the gold hunters.

After another night's undisturbed rest, the two pards began to discuss a thorough search for the lost gold.

It would, of course, be a "blind man's search," as Buffalo Bill put it, as they would have to take their own ideas and make their own guess from the little material they had, of just how and where to find the tree referred to in the ink-stained map, and then to locate the cave where the treasure was buried.

"I tells yer, Pard William, if we does find thet gold, we has got a harder riddle than thet to solve," intimated the old wilderness tramp.

"What is that, Pard Joe?"

"Why, who 'twas that kilt ther last man of them gold hunters."

"That is what worries me, Joe, as it does you."

"Yes, it's enough ter worry a angil, I opines, now that we has proved he didn't kilt hisself, and thet he did kilt all o' ther others."

"Granted that he did kilt all that accident or sickness had not removed from his way, Joe; what then?"

"Well, he hed things about as he wanted 'em, at last, and were sittin' in ther cabin a-considerin' all by hisself, and readin' over them papers."

"Now, thar was ther little ink-bottle, with none in it, and on ther floor."

"Yes."

"Thar war ther map and directions all ink-stained on ther table."

"True."

"Now, he war found lyin' on ther ground by ther table and he hed a bullet wound in his forehead."

"We know all that, Joe."

"He hed a revolver cocked in his hand, and two shots hed been fired, ther bullets bein' in ther door."

"Very well; granted that; what then?"

"Why, he were shot by somebody, and who is ther somebody?"

Buffalo Bill smiled, for Joe's brain had been running on that "lead" ever since they had come to the cabin, no matter what other matters had been canvassed.

Then he said, seeing that Joe was awaiting his answer:

"Well, Joe, we know that we found this lost cabin through the guidance of our mysterious guardian, and he told us we were too late, which shows that he knew all the gold hunters were dead. It therefore follows that he must have been the one who fired that last fatal shot."

"Bill, yer has hit it! That man kilt ther man we knows as doctor. It's all plain enough, now."

CHAPTER LXI.

A SUSPICION.

YET another night went by without disturbance or alarm, and the two comrades began to feel that the cabin there in that wilderness was indeed lost.

No redskin discovered it, and if any came it would be some prowling band who had discovered the stage-coach trail and had followed it to the end.

True, one other knew of the cabin and their presence there at that moment; but that one thus far had been their guard, their guide; he had defended them; and more; though his actions had been incomprehensible, yet all he did had been to insure their safety and the success of their perilous venture.

But, the mystery hanging over his identity was daily—almost hourly adding to the anxiety of both Buffalo Bill and California Joe, until at last the latter struck a chord which did not find ready response or acceptance with Buffalo Bill.

"I tells yer, Pard Cody, I has suthin' ter say," said Joe, after breakfast the next morning.

"Out with it, Joe."

"We doesn't know who our guard be."

"No."

"We doesn't know why he helps us."

"No; but we do know that he has done nothing but aid us."

"For what purpose?"

"Ah! there's the rub."

"Yes, thar it 'tis. What's the why of it? We did think it war one o' ther miners."

"We know now that it was not."

"We does, and knows that somebody, we guesses him, tuk ther letter and ther map to Cap'n Luke Langdon."

"Yes."

"We don't see in ther papers no mention of nobody else."

"No."

"Now, might not he hev come to ther camp, this cabin, and secretly be ther friend o' Doctor Darley?"

"Ah! I see your idea."

"Might he not played ther old trapper, hunter, or what yer will, and while bein' in with ther doctor, hev got ter carry ther message to ther cap'n?"

"For what purpose, though, Joe?"

"Well, he were workin', say, in with ther

Doc, and, ef so, they wanted ther gold carried to ther Overland."

"Well?"

"They c'u'd git it thar only if a coach was sent fer it."

"Ah, I think I catch your meaning."

"It was ter come with one man."

"Thet one man w'u'd be tuk keer of when he got here, and ther miner cap'n and t'other man would be kilt as they was."

"Go on."

"Thet would leave ther coach ter carry ther gold in, and ther Doc and this pard of his would hev ther hull game."

"Go on."

"I'm a-coming to my point, Pard Cody. Yer see, our guard bein' ther man, he comes here ter tell his pard ther coach were on the way and to see if ther Doc hed kilt ther last two men."

"Yes."

"He did come here, and seen that ther work was done; so, havin' his hand in, as far as killin' folks went, ther Doc concluded not to share ther gold, and so tried ter kill ther pard as hed got ther stage fer him, but jist slipt up in ther end and got his own chips called in."

"What else, Joe?"

"Then, t'other feller, bein' as he hed it all, jist come ter tell us whar ther cabin was, and will tarn up when he finds ther gold, and jist shoot yer, and me, too, from some ambush, and drive ther coach in to some station and hev ther fortin' all for hisself."

"Well, Joe, I have heard your story, and understand that you have a suspicion against the man who has so well served us; but I should hate to feel that he was so bad as you assume, and shall trust in him until I get some sign to make me believe he has other motives in view than to aid and preserve us."

"It are all possible, Pard Cody, jist as I have worked it out."

"I admit that, yet I do not wish to believe it probable or anywhere near the real facts of the case."

"Here we are, in the Big Horn Basin, a long way from the Overland Trail; we have found the men we came to rescue; but if we have not been in time to save their lives, we know that we traveled faster than was intended all through that man's guidance and oversight. So I shall proceed as though he was still our friend."

"We will try and find the gold, with or without his further help. If we cannot do so in a week's search, then we will face the dangers of our return trail and show that we did our best."

"I'm with you, Bill, whatever you decide is best to do; but I can't git over my suspicion o' thet man we don't know."

CHAPTER LXII.

THE THREE TRAIL.

MOUNTING two of the best of their horses, Buffalo Bill and California Joe started out upon the search for the lost gold *cache*.

All they had to guide them was their own sagacity, with the few lines in the ink-stained map which spoke of a pine tree, a certain number of paces in given directions and a cave among the rocks.

Both being men to make a shrewd guess as to a likely place of concealment they started out determined on unearthing the treasure.

One thing seemed certain, that the gold hunters had brought their gold to the cabin with them.

The bones of their used-up horses proved this, for they evidently had packed it upon the animals until they could go no further, and when they died, and sickness brought down some of the men, so that they were unable to go further, they had sought a secure retreat for themselves, built the cabin and there remained, in a spot that, in the end, had proven fatal to the last one of the venturesome band.

But, first, they must have hidden their treasure, corralled, as they then were, in that remote wilderness.

But where?

They began their search with perfect system and left no likely spot of concealment unvisited.

Buffalo Bill obliqued to the right, upon leaving the canyon, California Joe to the left.

They had agreed not to go beyond a dozen

miles, in their search for the tree answering the short description given.

All day long they pursued that search with keenest scrutiny, and at dusk both returned to the entrance to the canyon.

"What luck, Joe?"

"Not a bit."

"Nor I."

"I'll take your side to-morrow, you the side I examined, for one might see what either one missed to-day."

"Right you are."

"And we'll go on foot."

"Yes, that's the true method now."

"We'll let the horses rest all we can, for if we find nothing after a few days' search we must start back to the Overland."

"So says I."

So, another night went by, and getting an early start on the morrow the two pards again began their quest.

This time they went on foot, and each scrutinized the ground the other had taken the day before. All day long they tramped, and peered, and examined, and not until sunset did California Joe come in.

Buffalo Bill followed half an hour later, and found his comrade cooking supper.

"Got their gold, William?"

"Not a nugget, nor a true sign, Joe."

"Nor me; but I is hungry as a grizzly and tired as a stage horse."

They ate their supper almost in silence, and, attending to their horses both turned in.

But their hardened frames and steel-like fibers were recuperated, and the morning of the third day of the search found them off at dawn.

They kept together now and went over a new territory.

But it was the same story as for the days previous.

A dozen times they came upon spots that looked as though they had found the one to start from; a dozen times they confessed themselves baffled.

So they returned to camp as the day was drawing to a close.

"What's that on the door, Joe?" asked Buffalo Bill as a white spot caught his eye.

"Bill, it's a letter, sure."

"I should say it was."

"Our guardian has been here, sart'in."

"Yes, and now for news!"

Hastily walking forward, Buffalo Bill took from the door, to which it was fastened with a wooden peg, a slip of paper.

It was closely written upon, with a pencil, and the handwriting was the same as in the previous messages.

"Now, Joe, sit down and I'll read it," and Buffalo Bill and California Joe threw themselves upon the ground, while the former read aloud this further communication from the man of mystery—their invisible mascot.

CHAPTER LXIII.

THE LETTER.

WHAT was written upon the slip of paper was as follows:

"You have been searching for the gold of the men you came to rescue."

"If you did not find it here, nor have directions to lead you to the spot where it is hidden, it will be a useless search, for it may have been concealed at Jackson's Lake, where they wintered, or along the toilsome trail they pursued to this resting halting-place."

"You found those you came to rescue all dead, and you know what papers and other things they had with them."

"More came to this cabin than the three. Count the dead you found, and add to them the number of graves, here, when you came, and you have the number of men, the remnant who built this cabin."

"If ready to start upon your return, do so, and take with you the effects of the men, all that was left; but do not take the trail back by which you came, for it would lead to your certain death."

"Instead, though it will take longer, avoid all the cut-offs on my map and follow all the way the one sent to Captain Langdon by his brother."

"Even on this way you may find foes, for five men are in ambush for you—five white men who came from the Overland camps."

"They are led by Trumps the Sport, and you will know the others, doubtless."

"They will expect you to return by the trail you went, and so ambush you; but, by following the Langdon map, you can see that you may avoid them, though possibly not."

"They will believe that you have the gold—that you have rescued the gold hunters, and therefore, will fire to kill, showing no mercy, for they have come to get that treasure, at all hazards."

"Neither Wa-sha-kie, nor other chiefs of tribes will allow their braves to harm you, but small prowling bands of young bucks may give you some trouble. At least, be on the watch for them."

There was no signature; the letter ended as abruptly as it had begun.

Buffalo Bill, when he had finished the reading, turned to note the effect upon his old pard.

"Read it over ag'in, William, and go slow," requested Joe, as if not yet quite satisfied.

Buffalo Bill obeyed—glad to do so, for he wished to see if he had missed any point in it, himself.

"Well, Joe, what do you think of that?"

"No Injun wrote it."

"I am sure of that."

"A good letter writer he is."

"Yes, and all he says is to the point."

"Sart'in; he speaks as one who knows."

"What do you think about it?"

"Fu'st, he tuck chances in comin' here, fer we might hev come in and caught him."

"Yes."

"He's honest, fer he didn't take nothin', I guess."

"We'll see."

They made a quick search of the cabin, and ascertained that nothing was gone.

Then Buffalo Bill's keen eyes saw a slip of paper on the side of the coach.

He quickly went to it, to find that the mysterious visitor had left another note, as follows:

"Pardon me for appropriating some of your provisions, as I have nearly run out, my trail being longer than I had anticipated."

"I have helped myself to some flour, rice, coffee, sugar, bacon and a few other things I needed."

"Will return them at your camp on the Overland."

"Well, I'll be—"

"Don't swear, Joe."

"I hain't goin' ter cuss him, Bill, fer they hain't my things, and I knows he is welcome, as far as you goes; but I was goin' ter say thet he do be ther durndest delegate I ever heerd of. Why, Pard Cody, he s too honest ter live long."

"He appears to be a mighty square fellow, Joe."

"He do, and he don't know whar thet gold is, I'll take oath on."

"As I will."

"But he do know a heap about tralls."

"He does, for a certainty."

"And them as is layin' fer us."

"And he continues to be our Grim Guardian."

"He gives us mighty good advice."

"He does."

"And he knows about Injuns, too, and it was him as saved us before."

"I am sure of that."

"But, Bill, who is he?"

"Don't know, Joe."

"Now he tells us ther gold hunters war all dead, how many come here, all about Leonard Langdon's map, but he don't say a word about thet last one of ther band who was shot."

"Not a word as to how he met his death; but, do you still believe he wishes to kill us and get that gold?"

"No, I don't, and I axes his pardon."

"When does we start?"

"To-morrow, if you say so."

"I am ready."

And upon the next day the return trail of the rescue coach was begun.

CHAPTER LXIV.

THE AMBUSH.

THE rescue stage coach was again driven by Buffalo Bill, California Joe following with the horses in lead. It had proceeded well on its way back toward the Overland Trail.

As the letter of the mysterious guardian had suggested, the back trail had been the one marked down in the map sent by Leonard Langdon to his brother.

No adventure of importance had been met with, though they had found the way rugged and very dangerous, at times.

A wheel had broken, but the foresight of Buffalo Bill in bringing an extra one for both axles soon remedied this.

Then the pole had snapped in two, but an extra one was swung under the coach; so this mishap caused but little trouble and delay.

One of the horses had given out completely, and had to be left behind, Buffalo Bill hoping he would rest up and follow on, as horses often do when abandoned.

As there were extra horses, this loss was of little moment.

Not an Indian had been sighted, and, as game was plentiful, and the camping-grounds excellent, the pards did not suffer much for food or rest.

All along, however, a good watch was kept on the trail by day, and in camp by night, but nothing had yet given them cause for alarm.

One morning, soon after leaving camp, a lariat was found stretched across the trail, and upon it was a slip of paper.

A halt was made, and Buffalo Bill announced:

"Another letter, Joe, from our guardian. Trouble ahead, I guess."

"You bet there is."

The paper gave this information:

"Ahead, a dozen miles, is a long, narrow canyon, the cliffs on either side high and heavily timbered.

"In that canyon you will find the gambler and his men ambushed, so play some ruse upon them, as you cannot flank them, for it is the only pass through the range.

"You will not be halted by a command, but by bullets, so it would be well to reconnoiter ahead on foot, find where your foes are, and surprise them.

"Just where in the long pass they will wait, I cannot tell."

"Joe," said Buffalo Bill, when he had finished the message, "we are warned again."

"Yes, he's still perfectin' us."

"Suppose we play a game for those fellows?"

"Set a trap for 'em, William?"

"That is the idea."

"I'm in it with yer, Pard Cody, with both feet."

Then the two talked together for awhile, and soon after the coach rolled on its way again.

At last, the long canyon or pass through the range, was reached, and it was found to be a narrow way, with cliff-like sides rising a hundred feet or more on the right and left.

The tops were covered with heavy timber, so that down in the canyon, at noonday, even, it was a gloomy way.

The coach horses had come down to a walk, the reins hung loosely from the hands of Buffalo Bill, who sat upon the box fast asleep, his head drooping upon his broad breast, utterly unconscious it appeared.

He was in the pass where he had been warned that danger awaited him, danger of death.

Suddenly, with no warning voice to prepare one for what would follow, there rattled forth five shots from behind a bowlder which was one on side of the pass; the form of the driver gave a start and fell back on the top of the coach, motionless.

The horses, started by the shots, came to a quick halt, the leaders half turning in fright.

"Catch those leaders, quick!" shouted a voice, and out from behind the bowlder sprang the tall form of Trumps, the Overland Sport!

He was followed by four others.

But, just as he appeared, two rifles flashed from within the coach, and the gambler and one of his men fell dead in their tracks.

Then, wide open flew the coach doors and out leaped Buffalo Bill and California Joe, revolvers in hand, to give battle to the other three men, who, though startled by the fall of their leader and one other of their party,

had presence of mind enough to leap for shelter behind the bowlder, thus putting themselves in a good position and holding a great advantage over Cody and his comrade.

The two pards saw this, and knew that it was a fight to the death, with the chances against them; but, they took refuge behind the horses, just as they were fired upon and the two leaders fell dead.

But, as their three foes uttered a shout of triumph there came a shot from their rear, further along the canyon!

That shot dropped one of the two in his tracks, which so frightened his two companions that, forgetting the danger in their front, they sprang from their shelter and found themselves confronted by Buffalo Bill and California Joe!

Several shots were fired in rapid succession, and two men went down—the last of the gambler's party.

The pass was cleared of foes, just as a form bounded into view, revolver in hand.

He had come to aid Buffalo Bill and his pard, but started back when he saw that they needed no aid. He would have retreated, but for an earnest call to halt.

CHAPTER LXV.

YELLOW JACK'S DOUBLE.

WITH a look of utter amazement Buffalo Bill and California Joe gazed upon the one whose shot in the rear of their foes had killed one, and turned the tide of battle in their favor.

They saw that he had rushed in to help them, but only to find that they had ended the fight.

The one they saw was a large man, clad in buckskin from moccasins to skull-cap.

He was armed with revolvers and knife in his belt, and a rifle swung at his back.

But, *he was a Chinnee!*

"By the gods of war, it is Yellow Jack, the mysterious Chinnee!" cried Cody, in amazement and delight. "Yes, Jack, you have been our friend—the Grim Guardian of our trail! What do I not owe to you?"

With this Buffalo Bill stepped forward and held out his hand.

The Chinaman grasped it, but said in perfect English, and without any accent whatever:

"I am a Chinnee, yes, Mr. Cody, but you are mistaken, for I am not Yellow Jack."

"Not Yellow Jack?"

"No, sir."

"Do you expect me not to believe my eyes? As much as you Chinamen look alike, I know you too well, Jack, my Chinnee pard, and the good service you did me when you came after me on the trail and warned me of danger."

"I did do that, Mr. Cody, but still I am not Yellow Jack."

"Who are you then?"

"I am Yellow Hand once a medicine-chief among the Indians—the Chinaman you, as you believed, rescued from them."

"But I was not their captive, for I held great power among them, and went among them of my own will to study the virtues of the plants, herbs and roots they use in treating their sick."

"You, as you believed, rescued me, and I let it be so; but I had not yet finished my work among them, and so I played a Chinnee trick upon you and others."

"I have a brother, Mr. Cody a twin brother, the one you know as Yellow Jack."

"We came to this country as young men, to seek our fortune, for our father, once a man of wealth in China, had lost his money."

"We learned English under an American teacher, and I studied medicine, as also did my brother."

"When you took me to the camps, I sent for my brother to come there."

"He did so, and I returned among the Indians to get all my books written of my discoveries of plants and herbs, and to learn a little more."

"My brother you know all about. He owes you his life more than once; but of me you only know what I have now explained to you."

"My brother told me of your daring rescue trip, and urged me to help you."

"I was secretly visiting him there, in the camps, and so long as we did not appear together we were not known as two, for I was often taken for him."

"He told me of the plots against you, and we determined to save you, for we knew you were going to your death."

"It was I who came to your camp; then I returned and heard what else my brother had to tell."

"I discovered all, and I was able to help California Joe when he was fired upon."

"My horse is as fleet as the wind and as enduring as iron, and so I was near you on your whole trail."

"It was Yellow Hand, the chief, who saved you from Wa-sha-kie, and again from the young bucks who followed you, for they dared not disobey me, even when one of their number was missing, and they felt sure that you had killed him."

"I have followed your trail back here, and am glad to have warned you of danger in this pass."

"Had I not believed that you needed me, I would not have shown myself. But the secret is out now."

The story was modestly and simply told, and both Buffalo Bill and California Joe grasped a hand of the Chinaman, and expressed their deep gratitude for all that he had done.

Then Joe asked:

"But, Pard Chinaman, what I wants ter know is who killed Doc Dan Darley, ther last o' ther gold-hunters?"

"I did! I knew that whole country like a book."

"I had hunted it over after medicine plants, and I knew that the miners were there."

"When I last saw them they were at the cabin, but three of them, and I was sure that one of them was a traitor."

"I told Captain Langdon to watch him, but he did not doubt him, it seemed, and fell a victim to his poison, for there is no doubt but that he dosed him with morphine."

"The captain sent his map and letter by me, and Darley expected to kill you, Mr. Cody, as the one who came to the rescue, and then to work his way out of the Basin, or wait until I came again and have me guide him."

"I discovered how he had killed the soldiers, drugging their coffee, so that a relief force would not be sent."

"I knew that the captain was failing, so hurried you along."

"We were too late. I went to the cabin to find Darley alone, and the two dead men also in the cabin."

"He was mad with joy at his success, and when I entered the cabin, for he had not heard my call or knock, he sprang to his feet and opened fire upon me."

"I returned the shot and killed him; after which I went to tell you where to find the lost cabin."

"And the gold?"

"Did you not find the map to direct you how to find where it was hidden?"

"Yes, but so defaced by ink that it was useless."

"Then the gold is lost, for no one living knows its hiding-place," was the decided response!

"I believe you are right, for we two could not find it."

"But we did get some gold for the brother of Captain Langdon, and some papers that may prove of value."

"I hope so for he is a noble man, and should be something else than an agent of the Overland out in this wild land."

"As for myself, I found gold enough, while among the Indians, to make my brother and myself independent for life, here in America, for we are Americans. Mr. Cody, and shall live here, going to the East to find a home, for, through my brother, my gold-dust has been sent there already."

"But now, about Golden the Gambler and his men, for we must bury them."

"Just how far is it to the camps, for you know this country thoroughly?"

"By good driving you can reach there tomorrow afternoon."

"Then I shall take the bodies there, in the coach."

"And you will go with us?"

"No; I shall still remain unknown, but will visit my brother secretly, and then he will leave the camps and we will go East together."

"My good horse is at the end of the pass."

"And Bill, I guess thar hain't no need o' my goin' ter camp neither, so I'll light out fer the fort," said California Joe.

Entreaties were in vain, for both California Joe and the Chinaman went their separate ways, when they broke camp the next morning, for they did go on with the coach until nightfall.

And thus it was, as has been seen, that Buffalo Bill, placing the body of one of the men upon the top of the coach, drove into the Overland camps late next afternoon and said, as he drew rein, and the Division Agent and others pressed forward to welcome him:

"I am safely back again, Captain Langdon. There lies a man you may know, while there are more, in a like condition, inside the coach."

CHAPTER LXVI.

CONCLUSION.

It was a positive shock to the men in the camps, to recognize in the five dead bodies, brought in by Buffalo Bill, Dare Golden the Sport of the Overland, and four other men whom all knew well.

The mystery of it all was not cleared up, for Buffalo Bill had only to say that they had held him up to rob him, and, with the aid of California Joe and others he had gotten the best of them.

He also stated that Desperate Dave, and Wild Tom and his party could be accounted for in the same way, and all supposed that California Joe, "and others," had helped him in each instance.

But of this Buffalo Bill had no more to say, so the mystery continued.

But he did have a great deal to say to Captain Langdon, and the two hunters of the camps were given just so many hours to depart, or remain and ornament the limb of a tree.

They chose the first offer.

And Luke Langdon heard the truth of the long trail, and then first how his brother had died.

He was given the gold and the papers. Captain Langdon's first duty was to pay over to the daring rescuer the one thousand in gold he had promised him, and would have given more, but Buffalo Bill refused to take more than the sum agreed upon.

Then the captain told how a letter had come from a lawyer, asking about his brother, and telling him that he had some landed property that had turned out to be most valuable.

As Luke was his heir, and the deed which Cody had brought in with him, was of that very property, Captain Langdon said:

"You have made me a rich man, Bill. I shall resign my position for I must at once go East. To you I assign the place I now hold."

"I thank you, Captain Langdon, but California Joe told me that scouts were wanted at the forts, so I will give up Pony riding and go and get a place at scouting."

With Yellow Jack, Buffalo Bill had quite a long talk, and he found that his "Pigeon English" was all put on.

Soon after Yellow Jack went East; then Captain Langdon departed.

Buffalo Bill left for Fort Laramie, where he was at once given a position as scout, he being well known, while California Joe had loudly sounded his praises.

Joe was there, too, and when Buffalo Bill had turned the saddles and equipments of the little band of soldiers over, he and the old plainsman went off to the quarters of the latter and enjoyed a long talk about their remarkable expedition and their wonderful Chinese Guardian of the perilous trail.

A few months after arriving at Laramie Buffalo Bill had a letter from Captain Luke Langdon, telling him that he had become a rich man, through being his brother's heir, and had married the lady he had so devotedly loved, so was happy.

Some time after a letter came from "Doctor Wing Lee," an eminent Chinese physician, saying that he and his brother were prosperous, he practicing medicine, while "Jack" was a "professor" in a college.

Going into the Big Horn Basin with a

military expedition, years after as guide and scout, a thorough search was made for the lost treasure of the Gold Hunters, but it was not found, and has not been, to this day.

Only lately Buffalo Bill and the writer invaded the Big Horn Basin together, and the great scout saw that his prophecy was being at last fulfilled, for the beautiful land was fast filling up, and a village was springing into existence, which had been named "Cody City" in honor of the daring plainsman who had visited that wild land where death stared him in the face at every step.

Buffalo Bill won his world-wide reputation by just such daring deeds as are here portrayed and as the hero of this true story of the Lost Gold Hunters of the Big Horn Basin, but adds to his brilliant record one more remarkable episode.

THE END.

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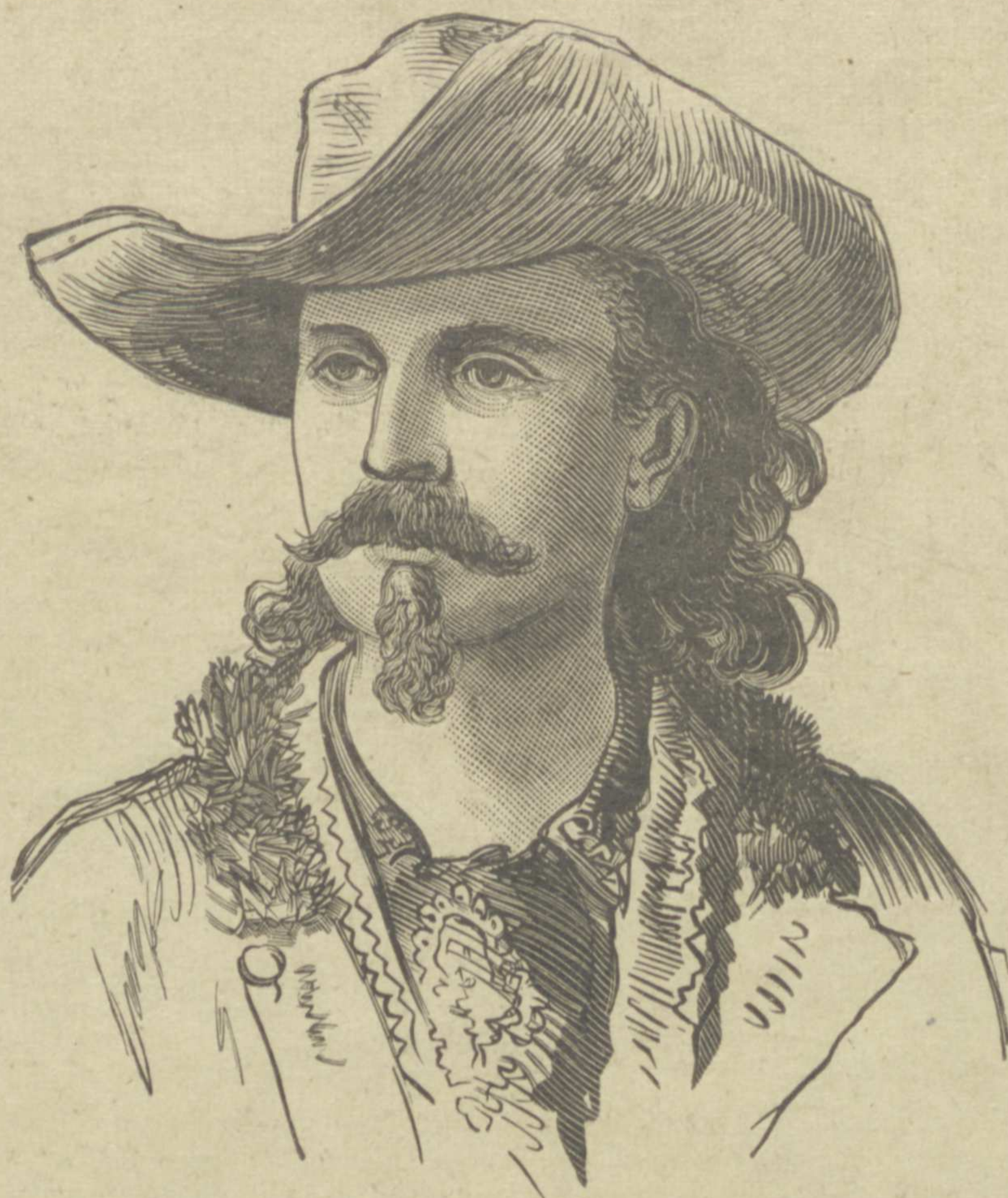
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